

--fourth season of "First Person." And our First Person today is Mrs. Elizabeth Strassburger, whom we shall meet shortly. "First Person" is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who are sharing with us firsthand their own experiences associated with the Holocaust.

Each "First Person" guest presently serves as a volunteer here in the museum. Each Wednesday through August 27th, we will present a new "First Person" guest. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides a preview of upcoming "First Person" guests. Again, that website is www.ushmm.org.

This 2003 season of "First Person" is made possible through the generosity of the Woldenberg Foundation, to whom we are grateful for making this year's program possible. We will listen as Elizabeth Strassburger shares her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Liz some questions. Before you are introduced to her, I have a couple of requests of you.

First, if possible, please stay in your seats throughout the hour program so that we minimize any disruptions while Liz is speaking. And second, we hope you have questions during the question and answer period, but if you do, please try to make your question a brief one. I will repeat the question before turning to Liz to respond to your question.

I would also like to let those of you with passes for the permanent exhibition, at either 1:30 or 1:45 today, know that they are good for the balance of the afternoon. So you can relax and stay with us until 2:00.

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims. 6 million were murdered. Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

What you are about to hear from Elizabeth Strassburger is one individual account of the Holocaust. 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. After the war, Liz moved to England and then to the United States in 1951, at age 13. She later would enjoy a successful career as a psychiatric social worker, working with emotionally disturbed children in Montgomery County, Maryland.

Today, Liz serves as a volunteer in 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, Jack, who is four and a half, and Ava, who is two years of age. I'm pleased that today we are joined by Liz's husband, John-- John, right here in the front row.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with the introduction of Liz. We have a map of Europe with an arrow that points to Poland. And as you can see, Poland is on the eastern side of Germany. Liz grew up in Iwonicz, 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. In this picture we have the identity card issued to Liz's father, Dr. Edmund Lusthaus, by the Polish army. And that, of course, is her father in the picture. 17 days later, the Soviet army attacked from the east, following the terms of the Nazi-Soviet pact, and Edmund was captured.

In 1941, Liz and her mother went to the Tarnów ghetto. And this arrow points to where Tarnów is located in Poland. In our next picture, we have Liz and her mother, Helena Lusthaus, holding Liz at age three, just before they were forced into the Tarnów ghetto.

Realizing the danger, Liz's mother purchased Aryan papers for Liz and herself and escape 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, as you can see at the top, states that she successfully completed first grade. Moreover, down the right side, it just simply says, very good in every subject that she took.

After the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto in April 1943, German authorities intensified their efforts to find Jews in the surrounding area who were 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 Milanowek.

And our map here will show you the route that Liz and her mother took to escape from Poland. In May, Liz's mother bribed a Russian soldier to smuggle them and shipping crates across the border to Czechoslovakia. From there, Liz and her mother went to Austria and then to Germany.

We are about to learn a great deal more from Liz about her experience during the Holocaust. And with that, I would like you to join me in welcoming our "First Person," Mrs. Elizabeth Strassburger. Liz, please join me.

[APPLAUSE]

Good afternoon. I'm pleased to say that my daughter is here, as well as my husband.

Where is your daughter?

There she is.

A little higher, so everybody knows who you are. There we go-- great. Thank you very much, Terry. Liz, Thank you for joining us and for your willingness to be our "First Person" guest this week.

You were born in Poland and living with your parents in the small town of Iwonicz-Zdroj when the Germans invaded Poland in September 1939. You were a very young child at the time, about 15 months of age. Do you mind by starting today by telling us a bit about your family, and your community, and your life before the Germans came in September 1939?

Well, I don't know-- I don't remember all that much. I know that my parents were together. My mother had been engaged to someone else. And when she met my father, she canceled the engagement and married him. My grandparents lived-- one set of grandparents lived in Tarnów. And the other set of grandparents lived in Stryj, which is a town to the west.

My father was a physician. The town was-- Zdroj means health in Polish. So it was really a spa, but not a Elizabeth Arden spa, but a spa where people came with aches and pains, and they were healed with all kinds of wonderful things.

And we had-- I remember we had a lovely house. My mother always talked about the house. We had some friends, I would assume, but I was 16 months old. When war broke out, my father was--

Just a couple of questions quickly for you, Liz. Your father was a physician.

Right.

But your mother was also well trained as well, wasn't she?

Right, my mother had been a pharmacist. But once she married my father, she gave up working. And two years after they were married, I was born.

You had described to me that your life and your family at that point, prior to the invasion, was actually an idyllic life in many ways.

I think it was. My parents loved each other. They were happy. They had a nice home. My father was working in a profession that he enjoyed. Everything was good. And then what happened was that the Germans came

from the west and the Russians came from the-- yes, from the east, and Poland was squashed.

And prior to going into the fighting business, my father had gone back to his own parents to say goodbye to them before he was sent to fight. And they lived in a Russian sector. We lived in the German sector. And when he tried to get back to us, he couldn't. And was taken to Siberia. And when my mother realized that he wasn't coming back, she did what every young woman with a child does, goes to her mother.

So she went to my grandmother, who lived in Tarnów. And again, it was not a bad life. My grandmother had a beautiful apartment. I was the only grandchild. I had toys. I had food. I remember-- what I remember most were the carpets-- very, very heavy, thick carpets, because I was always playing on the carpets. And then--

I'm going to ask you just one quick question.

Yes.

You mentioned your father. He had actually been conscripted. He was drafted--

Right.

--in the Polish Army.

Correct. Correct. And then we somehow-- my mother must have found out that he was in Siberia. And that was it.

And that was it.

That was it. We-- probably in about '41, we were taken into the ghetto. The Germans had made-- the ghettos were areas that were usually surrounded by walls of barbed wires and the Jews were kept in there. And the people that were young and able would go out of the ghetto, and they would march in lines, and they would work. And my mother worked in a tailor shop for the Germans.

At one point, I remember that there was a little-- it was like a hut or a place that had seats. And my grandmother had always said to me, if you're ever scared, you get under one of those seats, and I'll know where to find you. And I remember she and I were out somewhere, and the Germans came and took her. And I quickly went under the seat. And when my mother came back from work, she found me.

And my mother realized that-- after they took my grandmother-- they had an aktion. An aktion is just a listing where the Germans say we're going to take 2,500 Jews and send them to the killing camp. And the killing camp for Tarnów was Belzec, which was almost on the Russian border. And you got there, and you died. It was pretty much-- it was not a working camp. It was a killing camp.

Liz, I'm going to go back just a little bit. When you were forced into the ghetto, you mentioned that your mom then was forced to go to work--

Right.

--for the Germans.

Right.

What was she forced to do for them?

She worked in a tailor shop.

And making German uniforms, is that--

I would assume.

OK, but actually--

Working for them, whatever they told her to do, she did.

As a slave laborer.

As a slave laborer, correct.

As a slave laborer.

Correct, yes.

And tell me, in that time, your mother knew that your father had gone to Siberia, but did the family know anything else about it?

No.

So there was no contact or anything--

No, not at all.

--whatsoever.

Not at all. My grandfather, who lived in the Netherlands, and from whom my grandmother had been divorced, and she had remarried, and my grandfather had remarried, and my mother had a half sister in the Netherlands, would send her food-- food packages. So that helped a little bit. But after they took my grandmother, my mother knew that I was the next person to go. Because children were really worthless. We couldn't work. We couldn't do anything. So we would just be sent to the camps.

And my mother had a lot of friends in Tarnów because that's where her mother lived. And she found someone who sold her Polish Christian identity cards, one for herself and one for me. And somehow, we got out. And we went to Milanowek.

And Milanowek is just outside of Warsaw. It's a little town. And it's known for its silk production. And I didn't know I was Jewish. I thought I was Catholic. I went to school with the Sisters of Saint Ursula, the great Ursulines who wore the gray habits with the little skullcaps, and they were very, very tough. But all the little kids were very good. And if sister said, jump, you didn't say how high, you'd say is this high enough?

Liz, a couple questions before we talk about that period. Just so our audience understands that in the aktion in 1942, you were there and saw your grandmother taken.

Yes. Yes, I was.

And then at some point then-- do you know-- do you have any idea how quickly your mother made the decision once that happened?

Within a couple of days.

Within a couple of days.

This was the second aktion. And that particular ghetto was going to be liquidated. So she knew that I was next.

And so she was able to arrange papers for you to get out of there. Were ever able to learn how she was able to do that?

I think she had a friend, who had a friend, who had a friend kind of business. And people were willing to sell their own identity cards because they got money for them. And then they would say I lost it. And if they were blue-eyed and blonde-haired Christians, they would get another identity card.

So through her resourcefulness, somehow she was able to get those papers and able to get you actually out of the Tarnów ghetto and to Milanowek.

Yes. I lived with a family, a mother. Her name was Genowefa Bandyrowa. And she had two sisters, Wisia and Hanka. And Wisia was about seven or eight years older than I. And she knew I was Jewish, but I didn't. And it was her job to take care of me. And when I played outside with the children, it was her job to put mud on my face and my hair, because I was dark, and all the other kids were blonde, so I would be discovered. But I was just one more dirty kid that was playing.

At times, the Germans would come to the apartment, and my mother would put me to bed. And she'd put carbolic acid around. And they would say [NON-ENGLISH]. And she would say, krank-- that I was ill. And I had something around my neck or whatever. And they would just leave. They would just look at that. And where is your husband? He's in Siberia. So that was good, because that meant that we were pro-German.

Because he was a prisoner of the Russians.

Of course.

By this time, the Germans and the Russians are now--

Had parted ways.

Had parted ways. You mentioned carbolic acid. Many folks in our audience might not know what that is. So what was the point of that?

It's just something that you disinfected with in Poland.

So it' have a medicinal smell.

Yes.

So people would think you're sick because this medicine smell--

Right, exactly.

--was around.

And maybe they even believed that it would ward off illness. I don't know. It's just something that was used.

Tell us about the Stachura family. Tell us a little bit-- what do you know about that family?

Well, the Stachura family were the people from whom the IDs were taken. I don't know anything about them.

So you know nothing about them.

No, I know nothing about them.

So then you move in with this Christian family.

With this Christian family, the mother and the two daughters.

Do you have any idea how that was the family that you happened to move in with?

My mother had a friend who knew them, and they were willing to take a chance.

And they were willing to do this.

Mr. Bandyrowa was in-- he was in prison. The Germans had put him in prison. And the two girls were going to school. And I was going to school. And sometimes I had to hide. And we would go into the cellar with the vegetables. And sometimes my mother would go away to another house.

But for the most part, you were part of the household.

I was part of the household. I considered this family-- I would call her auntie, which is ciocia. And they were very good to us.

And they knew your circumstances?

They knew--

The did.

They knew our circumstances, but they didn't know-- I didn't know.

You didn't know.

Right.

They knew, but you didn't know. And their children knew, the girls?

Both the daughters knew.

How old were they?

Oh, let's see, Wisia was, I think, eight years older than I, and I was probably about four.

But still, she was only 12 years of age.

Yeah, 12 or 13, yes. Very sharp lady. I'm still in touch with her.

And we're going to come back to that, absolutely. That was an immense responsibility for a 12-year-old to presumably keep that secret.

But if you haven't lived through a war, you don't understand how strong it makes you. It's really very strong kind of a thing. We lived on. And eventually, the Russians came. This was after the Warsaw ghetto was-- exploded. And the Russians came and liberated us.

Before you talk about that, not only you have this assumed identity and living in this household, but you're also posing as a very different religion.

Right.

Tell us about being a Catholic when you were not.

It was wonderful. I didn't know any different. I went to church. Church is a wonderful place. It's warm, it's fuzzy. If you're good, good things happen to you. If you're bad, you go to confession, and all gone.

[LAUGHTER]

All the Catholics are laughing, right?

What about your mom, did she practice my Catholicism?

My mother had a bad knee, which always worked on Sundays. So my mother never went to church.

So no genuflecting and kneeling.

Yes, she couldn't do that because she had a bad knee. And I was a little kid, I didn't know. And I was raised to listen to my mother. If my mother said, do this, I did it. If she said, get under the table, I got under the table.

And this, undoubtedly, meant that you had to interact with priests and nuns.

Sure. Well, I went to school with the nuns, the Ursulines.

Did they suspect?

No. Nobody knew.

Nobody knew.

No. If more than one person knows, it's not a secret anymore.

Right.

And I was a good student. I was a good kid. And I listened to what they said. And I got good grades. And everything was fine. But after the Russians liberated us, my mother decided that she wanted to go to where we came from, which is the southern part of Poland. Warsaw was in the northern part of Poland.

And so by this time, Wisia's father had been released from prison. Because the Russians were now in power, and he was in a German prison, and then it meant he was pro-Russian. And he took her to Kraków, and she looked, and there wasn't a single family member that have survived the war.

There's a part, Liz-- before you talk about the Russians and the liberation any further-- am I correct in that the house you were actually in--

Yes, I want to talk about that. The house that we lived in had false panels. It had a big wardrobe. And behind it was a-- kind of a room where people could hide. And we had a collection of people coming and going through the house, that would hide for two days, or three days, or whatever.

And it was also one of the safe houses of the Polish underground. And it had little eagles on the windows. And if they were red, it meant danger. And if they were white, it meant it was OK, and they could be moved back and forth.

So under the Germans' nose, this house was part of the underground.

Right.

And so here you are, living in your false identity, and there's a parade of people coming through and hiding behind walls.

And people always say to me, well, didn't you tell anybody? You didn't tell anything. You kept your mouth shut, and you didn't--

You just saw comings and goings.

That's right, you went to school, you went to church, and that was it.

And just a little bit more about the eagles. They would be turned around to signify whether or not it was safe or not to come in?

Right.

At any point in your recollection, did any point Germans come to the house just to check things out.

Oh, absolutely, they came all the time. They would look for Jews, and they would come all the time.

And what would happen? What would you do?

I'd be in bed sick or I'd be in the basement--

Hiding down in the cellar.

--hiding. And it was something that happened all the time. So it's not as if it were suddenly a big surprise. The Germans went through on a regular basis just to make sure. And the thing was is if you were found-- not only the Jews would be executed, but whoever was there in the house would also be shot. So it was a big risk that this family took.

Speaking of being shot, weren't you at some point actually robbed at gunpoint during that time?

Yes. We had gone to visit some friends. And we were in a house. And there were robbers there. And everybody had to lie flat on the floor and not say a word. And I a little kid. I had to go to the bathroom. And they took me to the bathroom. And they stood outside, and they had this huge police dog. And I was absolutely petrified because he was four times as big as I was.

And after--

And then when we-- we had to report it to the police, we reported it to the police.

So you actually-- you went and then--

Reported it, because they let us go. And we reported it to the police. And I gave them a false address. And my mother was amazed that I could think of using a false address. But I think you get very-- very smart when you're hiding, and when you're in a really bad situation.

Do you-- do you recall knowing that you were so young, and in many ways just really doing what you were told, and keeping your self quiet, do you remember feeling fear much during those times?

Of course. People were getting shot all the time. There were bombs that were coming down. There were bombs of different countries. People were being shot. People were being taken off to concentration camps. But they were Jews-- bad, bad people. They had killed Christ so they deserved it. I was a good little Catholic child.

And that's the message that you were--

And that's the message that I got. Then after my mother came back from her trip to Kraków, and she realized there were no family members, she said to me, I have to tell you something. Your name isn't Barbara, it's Elizabeth-- Elzbieta. And we are Jewish. You're not Catholic.

Now, this is after the Russians--

This is after the Russians came. And I, of course, got hysterical and very upset. And the first thing that came

to my mind was I won't go to heaven. So I rushed to the priest. And I said, father, you have to help me. I have this terrible problem. And he said, what's your problem. And I said, I'm Jewish, will I go to heaven? And he said, no, get out of here. So that was my first really negative kind of a thing.

And shortly after that, we-- oh, there was one funny incident, if you can call it a funny incident. The woman who brought milk-- she would bring in these big, huge canisters. And she came with the milk, and they wouldn't let her go, the Russians. They wanted her to stay there. And, of course, she couldn't because she had to deliver milk.

And she took all the sheets in the house, and she tied them all together, and she went out of the upstairs window. And we thought that was pretty funny.

Do I remember that you at some point also spent a brief period actually in a convent?

Yes.

Tell us about that.

As we were trying to get out of Poland, we went south. And in a little town called Katowice, my mother put me into a convent for about a week while she was trying to make arrangements for us to get out. And she said, now Elizabeth, you are Barbara again. You are Catholic. And whatever the sister say, you do. So that was-- I did.

Do you have a sense of what life was like under the Russians once the Russians liberated the area from the Germans?

Well, we had food.

You had food.

We could walk the streets. We weren't being shot at. Maybe we had a future. And I think if my mother had found family, we would have stayed, probably, in Poland.

So not finding any family--

Not finding any family at all.

She decided it's time to move on.

Right. So we got smuggled out of Poland in crates of china. And there was straw, and then china, and then straw, and then I was in there, and then straw on top. And she had given me some type of a sedative, so I slept through it. And when I woke up, we were in Czechoslovakia. And we lived in the fields, and we ate raw potatoes. And then we got ourselves to Austria. And there were several of us.

And we went to a place, which was the first DP camp that I was in. And it was called the Rothschild Hospital. And it was in Vienna. And I walked in with my mother. And all the women and the girls were in one room, and all the boys and the men were in another room. And we had beds, separate beds. We had food.

The first thing they did was they sprayed us with DDT in case we had lice. And there were all kinds of people. And they were all Jewish. And even though they spoke a different language, because they were people that had come from other countries, there was some kind of an affinity between us. Because they were all Jews, and we had all survived.

Then, that was a short-term place, and we went to another-- then we were taken to Germany, to another camp. And that was the Funk Caserne camp. And it was a kind of a sanitarium for sick children. And I was very emaciated. I was very skinny. And so we stayed there for a short period of time.

And then my mother decided that she would like to go to Israel, because she thought she had friends or family there. So we went to--

And at this point, your mother still believes there's nobody left in the family alive.

Right, exactly. So we went to this-- it was a camp for orphaned Jewish children, who had lost one or both parents. And we were all going to Israel. And my mother started working as a pharmacist. And I started learning Hebrew. I had friends. It was kind of nice.

And then a medical commission came through the camp. And my mother recognized one of the men. And he said, oh, my gosh, you've survived. And she said, yes, I'm here, and my daughter is here, but we lost my husband. And he said, no, no, no, no.

How would she-- how would she have recognized this man?

He was a friend of my father's.

He was a friend of your father's from when he was a physician--

Right.

--in Poland.

And he said, he's in Italy. He's with the British army, fighting against-- whatever his name is-- I can't think of it-- Mussolini, thank you very much.

After fighting against Rommel.

Yes. So then the next day, my father sent an ambulance, because if you're a doctor, that's your mode of transportation. So the ambulance came, and I was eight years old. And I met my father essentially for the first time. Because he left when I was 16 months old.

So the ambulance drove you to Italy, to where he--

Right.

--where he was.

If some of you have been to Italy-- in Ancona, which is about here. And it's on the Adriatic Sea. And it's a beautiful, beautiful place. And then my father told us that he went to Siberia. He worked as a physician.

In the camps.

In the camps.

In a gulag, basically.

In the gulag, exactly. And in Asino-- Novosibirsk and Asino. And he took care of the prisoners, so he got a little better food, and he got a little better clothes, and whatnot. I know he lost several toes because of the frost.

And then General Anders came. And he was a Polish general, and he wanted to form a Polish battalion. He was thought to be somewhat antisemitic, but he had to take Jews because he needed doctors, and he needed dentists, and he needed people that would take care of the army.

And the army went to North Africa. And they were in Egypt. And they were in Persia-- in those days, which is now Iran. And they fought against Rommel. And then the army went to Italy, and they fought at Monte

Cassino against Mussolini. And we stayed in Italy for six months after we cleaned up Mussolini. And then we went to England, because the army went to England.

And I lived in Northumberland, which is the County that's the top of England, which is near Scotland. It's the home of the Percy's, if you remember your Shakespeare. And we lived there for about five years. And then my mother found a great aunt.

Your father survives these camps in Siberia.

Right.

He's able to become part of Anders army in Russia at that time. Finds himself going into Africa and then to Italy. Then, of course, as you said, the army itself gets moved to Germany-- I mean to England. And you're there for a few years. What did your father do once you got to England? Was he still a part of the army?

Well, he was part of the army, so he was a physician with the army. And then he became a school physician.

So you'd made your life in England.

Yes, and we were very happy in England. That's where I learned English. I lost any Italian that I'd known in Italy, just completely left, obviously. We still spoke Polish at home, but English was the language.

At that point, living in England several years after the war has ended now, had your mother or father been able to find anybody else in the family at that point?

Well, my mother found a great aunt, who was my grandmother's sister.

Just one great aunt.

Right. And her husband-- they were living in Newark, New Jersey. And she was trying to get us to come to the United States. And my father had found a cousin in Australia. And so it was a case of Australia or--

Because that was the two places where you had living relatives.

Yes.

That you knew about.

And we had some distant cousins in the United States also. So we got on the Queen Mary, which is-- we didn't quite come in steerage. And we came to the United States. And my father started studying because he had to pass his boards again. He had to do an internship. And he couldn't practice in New Jersey, even after he did all that because you had to be a citizen, which took five years. So he got a job in Maryland.

And then we came to Maryland. And the last year of my high school, in New Jersey, my mother and I stayed for a year so I could finish high school in one place.

Which makes you right around 18 years of age. So the remarkable.

17, I was smart.

That's right-- remember all the very goods. I think that was a precursor of that.

Well, the reason for that is-- I'm trying to be funny, because if I didn't, I'd cry a lot. When I went to school in England, they have a different system. And at the age of-- let me see-- 10 or 11, you go into either a tract, which is commercial, or track that will take you to university. And so I'd had algebra, and I'd had geometry-- by the time I was 13, when I came here-- and I'd French, and I'd had lots of things that kids here don't really get until they're in high school.

But I was 13, so I went into the eighth grade, and I was, of course, bored stiff, because I was repeating everything. And then when I got to high school, my father suggested that I go to summer school. So for two summers I went to summer school. And I took all these courses that I had already had in England, but at least they were six weeks, rather than a whole term. And that's why I graduated earlier.

So when you came to United States, you clearly were academically prepared.

Yes. But I was 13. I think they've changed that. I would ask one of the young people if that works.

But apart from the academics, doing well in school, what was it like for you as a young teen to be uprooted again, come to another country entirely, and start a new life? Were you able to have what you might consider a normal teenager's life at all?

Not really. Probably not really in the beginning, because my father had to study, and he had to do his internship. My mother had to go to work. She worked as a sales lady in a bakery. And that meant that the only other person that was left had to do the cooking, and the cleaning, and the grocery, and that was--

And that's you.

That was me. So I went to school, and I cooked, and I cleaned house. And I went shopping, and I did all the things that housewives did. And my mother worked.

And your dad studied--

And my father studied.

--to tried to become a physician.

Right. And then he got so good, he was teaching the course to other doctors who were foreign so they could pass the boards.

And so after all of that, he ends up landing a job in Maryland.

Right.

And then after high school, because you stayed an extra year, you went to Maryland.

Then I went to University of Maryland, and I met John before I graduated, right? Yes. And he's from Delaware. And we lived in Hyattsville. And then we lived in Syracuse. And both our children were born in Syracuse. And then we came back here. And we've been here since 1969, I think, or 1970.

Yeah, he's helping me. In 1990, John and I decided to kind of follow my roots, so we went back to-- first we went to Holland because my grandfather had come from Holland. And then we went to Poland.

And in Poland, I wanted-- we had been corresponding with Wisia.

And Wisia again is the little girl.

She's my friend. She's my friend, right. And she was living in Warsaw. And we had been sending her lots of packages and stuff, and packages to her mother. And then my father died in 1960. And my mother said, I can't really afford to do that anymore. I have to go back to work and whatever. So we kind of lost touch.

But I still had the address. And we got to Warsaw, and we looked in the telephone books and couldn't find her. And so we decided to go to Kraków. And we went to Auschwitz. And we met a very nice professor of Jewish theology from Oxford. And he was studying families-- the southern families in Poland who had saved Jews.

And we told him my story. And he said, you must go and see her. And we said, but we can't find her. And he said, if you have the address, just go there and ring the bell. So that's what we did. We went and we rang the bell.

And I said, I'm looking for Mrs. So-and-so. And she said, that's me. And I said, may I come up and see you? And she said, yes. And here we are, two old women. And we're looking at each other. And I know who she is, but she doesn't know who I am.

And I say to her, Wisia, do you do you recognize me. And, of course, she hasn't seen me for 45 years. And she says, no. And I say to her, I'm Basia. And we started to cry, and we started to hug. And it was very moving.

And this was 1990.

That was 1990. And she told us that-- I didn't know that she knew I was Jewish, but she told me that she knew. She knew I was Jewish, and nobody ever told me. And then she also told us that there was another family on the same street that had been sheltering Jews, and they had been found out and shot. So we didn't know that either.

The family too.

Yeah, the other family had been shot.

Did Wisia have a sister?

Wisia had a sister, whom I didn't like. Because she was much older than I, and she just really didn't want to have too much to do with me. I was kind of peasy, probably. And she just died recently. But on a regular basis, I send Wisia money. We send her money. We send her-- now that I'm in this wonderful place, here people go to Poland all the time, and they take money to her.

And the first money that she got, she bought a phone so she could call me. And I said, I'm not going to give you my telephone number because I don't want you calling me and spending all that money. I want you to use it for yourself. She's on a pension and her husband's on a pension. And she has two grandchildren. So it makes us feel good that we can do that.

Did her mother survive the war?

Her mother survived the war and died-- I'm trying to think-- maybe in '51. And then her father died before the mother.

And you're still in contact with Wisia--

We're still in contact.

--to this day.

Oh, yes, absolutely.

That's pretty amazing.

And there are people in this audience that have taken money to-- to her, that work in the museum. It's a good thing.

Well, why don't we do this, Liz-- I could ask you many more questions, but I think we ought to turn to our audience and see if they have some questions they'd like to ask of you. And so, it's your turn. And I will repeat the question once you ask it so that everybody hears it, including Liz. And then Liz will respond to

your question. So please, feel free to ask the questions that you might have. Ah, there, one person who's not bashful. Yes, ma'am.

I was just wondering after your grandmother was taken and you mom got the false papers and you were able to escape, was she just able to leave the slave labor, like her job? I mean, they obviously knew she was gone. Did she have the freedom to just leave from the ghetto?

The question is, when your mother-- after your grandmother was taken, and your mother got the false papers so you could leave the ghetto, your mom obviously had this slave labor job, where she was expected to be. And so the question really is, how was she able to leave there? And I guess you're asking, without even being noticed? How did she get away without triggering all kinds of repercussions?

I'm not sure-- I'm not even sure they noticed because I don't think they kept very good books. And one Jewish woman was as good as any other Jewish woman. And maybe she died of starvation, maybe somebody shot her. So it didn't matter. Maybe she went to the concentration camp. Nobody really paid attention unless they caught you escaping.

OK, thanks for that question. Young lady, right here.

When you escaped, did you just walk out the door? How did you get from inside the ghetto out?

The question is when you escaped, how did you get out? You just walk out the door?

I think we did. I think she did. And I think someone smuggled me out somehow because I was a little kid. And then we had papers, so we could take a train if that was possible. We could get rides with people. I never-- I never thought about it.

And I imagine there was just constant asking for your papers, to see your papers.

Oh, yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Wow, thank you. Yes, ma'am.

Your mother was able to find family members, like a great aunt. Nowadays, are you able to find other family members?

No.

The question, for those of you in the back, she asked that since Liz was able to find some relatives at that time, like the great aunt, since then have you been able to locate other family members.

Pretty much, everybody's dead. We had some cousins in New York. And I think all the older people are very, very old. And we're not very close, which is a shame.

Yeah, thanks. Who else we have? We have a gentlemen here.

In the ghetto, did they separate Jews from Catholics and everything like that.

Yes.

The question is, in the ghetto did they separate Jews from Catholics?

But I don't think that-- probably somebody who works in the museum would know better-- I don't think there were Christians in the ghettos. The ghettos were strictly for Jews. Is that correct? I saw Susie here.

Yeah. Yeah, you were-- the ghetto was just for a concentration of all the Jews into one small location. And typically, Liz, that would be an area that just became so overcrowded and compacted so that everybody was

constantly--

Well, it didn't get that overcrowded, because they were sending people off right to be killed. But new people were taking their place.

Bringing in from surrounding areas and moving in. Two questions right here-- the young lady here.

I was wondering if anyone ever offered any type of explanation of taking your grandmother away.

But I was a little kid. I'll let you repeat it.

The question was, since your grandmother was taken when you were a little child, and then you adopted the identity and believed you were Catholic, was an explanation ever offered as to what happened to your grandmother?

She died. My mother said she died. People were dying, and she was old. She was probably in her 50s, but that, to me, was very, very old.

And, of course, you were very young when she disappeared.

Yes. And Poles were being taken also. There were Polish people that were going to camps also. But she just-- my mother just said she died. And little kids don't ask for much explanation.

OK, the young gentleman right behind her.

I have a question about the living quarters in the ghetto, and how many people you were sharing it with.

I don't remember.

The question is about the living conditions inside the ghetto, how crowded your housing was, how many people were living there.

I don't remember how many. I know my mother was there. My grandmother was there. There was an aunt and several other people, and probably a whole bunch of other people too. What I remember, the difference between the ghetto and my grandmother's house were the rugs and the amount of food. That's what I remember. But little kids don't pay-- you would pay attention at your age, but little kids don't really care. I had my mother, and that was the most important thing.

And as you'd said earlier, some food packages were being smuggled in.

And my grandfather had been sending packages.

Been sending them in.

Yeah. It's interesting, because probably within the first couple of years that I came here, and I wanted to look up my grandfather and what had happened to him. And Susie, who was my supervisor at that point, said that there were books that the Western countries had. They were yahrzeit books.

I found my step grandmother and my mother's sister had gone on a specific train to Sobibor, which was also a killing camp. But I never found anything about my grandfather, so I don't know

Not at all.

--if he died a normal death or what-- or was in another country, or whatever. He was a diamond merchant.

But his fate is completely unknown.

Yes.

OK, question, young lady right here.

Before you reached England, could you in any way practice your faith as a Jewish person. Could you-- within your home, would you practice the beliefs?

Very important to her. But she would say, I'm a Jew here, I don't have to be a Jew here.

OK, I think we have a young man. Is that a young person-- right back there, I can barely see you.

When you were in the ghetto and your mother was working, did you go to work with her? Or did you stay where you were?

That's a very good question. The question is, when your mother was working in the ghetto, did you go to work with your mom or did you stay behind in the ghetto while she was out working? Did I get that right?

Well, I was four years old. So I stayed with my grandmother. And that's why when they took my grandmother, my mother had to get me out of there. Because nobody would have been there to take care of me.

And that's why you saw your grandmother go.

Yes.

Thank you for that question. Anybody else have a question? We have a gentleman in the back.

Yes. How difficult was it for you to grow up Catholic and all of a sudden have to have to change everything?

Good question. How difficult was it for you to grow up Catholic and then all of a sudden, when you found out weren't Catholic and you were, in fact, Jewish, to really have everything change for you? What was that like for you?

Very difficult. Very difficult. Because Catholicism is a very powerful religion. And in Europe, and especially in Poland, it was all or nothing. And when it's drummed into you all the time, it's hard. But my parents were Jewish, so I was Jewish. I was still a good kid.

OK, yes ma'am.

Your parents went through a tremendous ordeal because they were obviously old enough to really [INAUDIBLE]. [INAUDIBLE] and very, very afraid during those times, especially the years they were separated. Did they talk about that very much after they were reunite and during your years of growing up? Were they eager to reminisce? Did they choose to avoid the subject because it was uncomfortable?

The question is, your parents, because they were adults and they went through so much that was so difficult for them, including being separated for so long, that after the war, after they were reunited, did they did they talk about that? Did they reminisce about that experience? What was their reaction to it with you, as you were growing up?

If they did, I'm not aware of it. It was really a very taboo subject. Most people didn't want to talk about it. It was too painful, too many memories, too many deaths. 6 million people is a powerful number. You say, there, but for the grace of God go I, kind of thing. And it wasn't in style. Or I guess we didn't really get permission to be able to talk about it.

And I think this is one of the things that this museum has opened up to a lot of people, that it's OK to talk about it. And it's OK to feel bad about the things that have happened. And it's OK to cry too.

Good question. Right over here.

How old were your children when you told them about your past.

The question is, how old were your children, Liz, when you told them about what you'd been through?

I'm looking at my daughter, and she's shaking her head. I think-- I think probably when they were teenagers. I'm trying to remember. There was a show on TV about the Holocaust and people going to the camps. And I couldn't watch it. And I remember my son said, I'm going to watch it for you. But I don't remember. You don't remember growing up with it, do you?

I don't remember [INAUDIBLE]

Yeah. OK. All right, thank you. I'm actually going to inject a question here, if I may, Liz. It may be my last chance. You went into the helping profession as a psychiatric social worker, working with emotionally disturbed children. Do you think your experience as a youngster guided you in any way in terms of your choice of profession?

Perhaps. I don't know. I wanted to go into medicine, but I couldn't stand hurting people. I guess I'm a softy. Probably-- maybe I wanted to give back because I had been fortunate I had survived.

And to work with children who've been through so very much.

Yeah.

OK. Let's go for one more question, then we'll begin to do our wrap up here. We have one right back there.

What's the one thing that you think your mother gave you as far as something that she taught you in your life. What's one thing that you take from what you experienced with your mother that you always carry with you?

That's a nice final question what is the one thing that you would point to that your mother gave you that you will always carry with you from that time?

I think her strength. My mother was a very, very strong person. And she was one of these people that would say, if it happens, it happens. And then the wonderful statement that she always said-- if you have money, and you don't spend it, the devil comes and takes it away.

[LAUGHTER]

I guess, just to follow up on that, your mother was obviously a remarkable and a strong woman. And she lived until--

She was-- until 1987.

Did that strength always stay with her?

Yes.

OK.

Yeah, my mother was a tough cookie.

I can imagine. Liz, on behalf of our audience and the museum, I want to thank you for spending this time with us, for sharing the details of your personal experience, knowing how painful they are. I think for all of us, it's very difficult to imagine what it would be like to be a young child and to assume a different identity, even if you didn't know. And then to find out later that the life you thought was yours was not. I think you've

given us a very vivid sense of what that must have been like for you.

Before I turn back to Liz as our "First Person" to conclude today's program, I want to thank all of you for spending time with us today. And to let that we have a "First Person" program each and every Wednesday until the 27th of August. Next week, March 26 at 1:00, we will have another "First Person" program.

And next week, we will feature two survivors in the same program. Our "First Persons" will be Jill Pauly and her sister, Inge Katzenstein. Mrs. Pauly and Mrs. Katzenstein, who are from Germany, fled Germany following Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass, and went to Kenya.

They struggled to rebuild their lives in Kenya until 1947, during the time of the Mau Mau uprising, when they then came to the United States. So we invite you to come back next week, as well as any other Wednesdays that you might be able to between now and the 27th of August.

It's our tradition that the "First Person" has the last word. And so with that, I'd like to turn back to Liz to offer us any concluding thoughts that she may want to share, including maybe some thoughts just about the museum itself and what that means to you. Especially, you made the earlier comment about it had a liberating effect in terms of the ability to talk about the Holocaust.

I too want to thank all of you for spending this hour with me. It's very cathartic to be able to talk about it. And I think this museum has been incredible. It has a message. It has a mission. And I hope that all of you take a little bit back and pass it on to your friends and other people.

And then the next time you get angry with someone that maybe you think about all the people that died and didn't really have a chance to get angry. And maybe you'll just be nice. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]