

Good afternoon. And welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. This is our fourth season of First Person. And our First Person today is Mrs. Helen Luksenburg. We shall meet Helen shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand experiences during the Holocaust and World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here in the museum. We will have a First Person program every Wednesday through the end of August until August 27.

The museum's website at [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)-- that's [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)-- org provides a list of the First Person guests that will be here each Wednesday until the end of the program in August. This 2003 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Woldenburg Foundation, to whom we are grateful for sponsoring this year's program.

Helen Luksenburg will share with us her first person account of her experience during 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, I have a couple of requests of you.

First, we hope that you could stay seated throughout our program. That will minimize any disruptions for Helen and for the audience while Helen speaks. And second, when we get to the question and answer period, and we hope that you'll have questions, but if you do, please try to make them as brief as you can. I will repeat the question before Helen responds. And that way we ensure that everybody in the room, including Helen, hears the question.

I'd also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the 1:30 or 1:45 time for the permanent exhibition know that your passes are good for the rest of the afternoon. So no reason to jump up because you're afraid that you might not be able to get in the permanent exhibition because you'll be able to do so.

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.

As you will hear today, after the German invasion of Poland, Helen was eventually deported and forced into slave labor and ended up at the Ravensbrück concentration camp before her liberation. She came to the United States in 1949.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Helen's introduction. And in this 1941 picture of Helen Luksenburg, who was the eldest of three children from a comfortable middle class Jewish home, we have her-- and I will share with you her birth name, Hinda Chilewicz.

Our next slide is a map of Europe with our arrow pointing to Poland. And then we next in our map have a map of Poland with our arrow pointing to Sosnowiec, Poland, where Helen was born April 4, 1926. In this photo, Helen, who is in the middle with a circle, and two cousins, Edzja and Hadassa Sudzanowska, posed with a bear in Sosnowiec 1938.

In this photo, we have the German army marching into Poland. Helen was just 13 when the German army invaded Poland September 1, 1939. By the end of the year, Jews are subject to a host of discriminatory laws. Helen's father had to close his textile business.

In 1943, the Jews of Sosnowiec were forced to move into a ghetto. In this photograph, it's of a sewing training workshop in the Sosnowiec ghetto. Helen is in the middle with her head down. You should be able to see her slightly to the left of the young man who's in the foreground. As Helen may tell us, her mother said, we don't know what's ahead, you never know what skills you'll need, and insisted that Helen take the sewing class.

These two photographs, on the left-- Helen is in both of these. On the left, we have members of the Zionist youth movement in the Sosnowiec ghetto. And Helen is on the right, kneeling in the foreground in the picture on the left. In

our picture on the right-hand side, it's a group of young Jewish women who were members of the HaNoar HaTzioni youth movement, picking vegetables on the farm. And Helen is kneeling on the right-hand side of this picture as well.

Helen was deported to Gleiwitz after being selected for forced labor. 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 Ravensbrück concentration camp and then to another place before being liberated by Soviet troops in May of 1945. And our arrow traces the path of that death march that Helen was on taking her from Gleiwitz near Auschwitz up to Ravensbrück.

Helen reunited with Welek in a displaced persons camp in the American occupied zone of Germany. They were married October-- excuse me-- March 2, 1947. And here, we have their wonderful wedding portrait.

She now lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, with her husband Willy, Welek, who is also a Holocaust survivor, about whom we will hear more today. They have three children, two doctors and an attorney. They also have five grandchildren. And I'm pleased to let you know that Willie is also with us here today. Willie, if you wouldn't mind a little wave so people know you're down here. Great.

[APPLAUSE]

Folks, we have some seats here. And while Helen's coming up on the stage in just a moment, you certainly could come down and fill into the seats down here. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our "First Person," Helen Luksenburg. Helen could you join me?

[APPLAUSE]

Helen, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness 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 heavy industrialized city close to the German border. Perhaps we could begin today by having you tell us about your family, your life, your communities in those years leading up to the invasion of Poland by the Germans on September 1, 1939.

I was born in Sosnowiec. I was the oldest one of three children. I had a brother and a sister.

I was going still to school. I went to private school, Jewish private school. And in 1939, we lived a-- we were middle class. I wouldn't say that we were very rich. But we're middle class. I never experienced any lacking of anything.

It was very hard life in Poland. Poland wasn't Westernized enough. And even we, I was-- Sosnowiec was right on the German-Polish border. So we had more Western culture involved. And even my mother used to cook a German kitchen. And my father used to--

The second language in our city was German because at one time part of Poland was after the First World War, it was a plebiscite. And part of the Silesia was incorporated. They were voted because Poland promised better conditions to people who will become Polish citizens. So part of it was actually German.

It was a big, new city. It was a lot of-- we were working on coal and mills. Steel mills were there. It was a very industrial city.

It was very cold wintertime. I used to-- I remember walking-- I couldn't use a streetcar because I used to throw up on the streetcars. I had a couple miles at least to walk to school. And I remember the last year how my mother bundled me up. I couldn't-- even my nose was covered with a shawl because it was so cold.

It was also very, very polluted, wasn't it?

Oh, yes.

Because of the coal and--

I have one experience that after 10 years ago I was in Poland. It was in December. The snow was on the ground. When the snow fell, an hour later, it was all black. Very polluted.

And that's what you were growing up with.

That's why every year, my mother used to say, take a deep breath. We used to go into the mountains for fresh air because it was such a polluted area. And I remember how she said-- she used to drag us in the mountains. And she said, take a deep breath. And she even took home with her-- there were some spas who have a water, mineral water. She used to bring bottles of water with her.

My mother in general was a fanatic, health fanatic. She, going back 60 some years at least, she used to take-- she used to say that the red meat is not healthy. She came from a family of 11 children, 6 brothers and 5 sisters. And she used to tell her brother, everybody who was over 40 shouldn't eat red meat.

So one of the original health food individuals.

And during the war, we didn't have enough food. And my father used to say, what am I? An animal? A cow? Everything grains. So we used to eat grains and grains. [LAUGHTER]

It's a period during the summer, what it starting next week, in the Jewish religion where you are not supposed to eat red meat, just dairy. She was the happiest person because she didn't have to-- she used to make dairy dishes and a lot of vegetables. We used to have hamburgers like made from cauliflower, from spinach. And the spinach, when you ate, could taste the iron on your teeth, and the same rhubarb. Here, when I used to eat spinach and I cook rhubarb, it doesn't have the same flavor.

Anyhow, so I went every summer on vacation. And life was good. People asked me after the war when I came to America, why we stayed so long? Why didn't we leave before? Because Hitler came to power in 1933.

And I remember, I saw the city on the maps. It's Zbaszyn. They put them on the border in Zbanszyn. People, German, lived in Germany, who were born in Poland, and they put them on the border. And we had to accept them. We had already in 1938, we had to share some housing with them. And so the situation, everybody knew what's coming.

Right. The situation had gotten so bad even before the invasion.

Very bad. But it's not so easy. A lot of young people, when the war broke out, run to Russia. But we were three children. I was the oldest one. It's not so easy to pick up and run, to relocate. Oh, maybe people who had a lot of money, maybe they could buy their ways. But we were not so rich.

So 1939--

Helen, tell us just a little bit about your father's business. What did he do?

He was in textile. He used to, I remember, used to go travel to Łódź, what was the textile capital, and bring materials and things and sell them. And he was a very kind-- one thing I will never forget, that my father, when the war broke out-- no, I get to it later.

You did tell me about what a kind man he was, that he had a very small business. It wasn't a big business, a very small business.

Yes.

He always carried food with him to give to poor children.

That's what-- no, that was my mother.

OK.

My mother-- I used to come to school with-- always what was in this school, on the handle of the door was a red-- a white bag with a red cross. And we used to bring breakfast for the poor children. So every day, I used to bring a roll with cheese or whatever it was.

And also, my mother used to be, as I said, a health nut. Came summertime, she used to always preserve everything. Our ceiling in the kitchen had to be painted every day-- every summer because she was too-- she used to preserve the tomatoes to make tomato soup. She used to preserve all kinds of berries, makes juices, wine. And every day, I used to go to the grocery store and bring a kilo of sugar because so much sugar she used up.

For her preserving.

But that came in very handy during the war. We didn't have anything on the bread. And all her nieces and nephews used to come to ciotka Chana, to Aunt Chana to put something on the bread.

Because she had preserved all of this.

She preserved everything. She used to exercise every day. And she used to drag us-- I remember going with her to the bathhouse for a massage. And she used to schlep me up the steps in the steam room. And I almost fainted. And she used to take that wooden bucket and pour the water on me.

Cold water probably.

It's good for you. She really was-- if Hitler wouldn't kill her, my mother would live to 120. That even in the building where we lived, if anybody got sick, they used to knock at our door, middle of the night, that my mother was like a doctor to help them what to do.

First of all, I'll give you advice. For sore throat, lemon, she used to squeeze the lemons. And we used to drink. And it really helps. Straight, it's vitamin C. Used to help us that-- the sore throat goes-- and my daughters-in-law believe it now too.

[LAUGHTER]

Now, Helen, of course, everything changed for you so dramatically with the invasion of Poland--

The war broke out. We came back. We went to a summer vacation. And I remember we took to a spa, a famous spa, Krynica. And we went to see over there the mineral waters. And my mother, as we were leaving in a fiacre, you know like the ones who are in Central Park? And my mother said to us in Polish, [POLISH]. Let's go home because will be a war.

The Polish army was putting mines already in the woods. And that was August 1939. So we came back home. And the war broke out September 1.

The first day of war, the Germans were there. We were standing outside. It was a Friday night. And giving the Polish army came-- was going back defeated already.

And this was your first day?

Yes, the first day. And everything, it wasn't motorized at all the Polish army, everything they had to carry on their back.

And we stood there and gave them hot coffee to drink.

And it's important for the audience that you were living, as you said earlier, so close to the German border--

To the German border.

So the effect was immediate.

In a few hours, they were in my hometown.

Right.

And it started. The next Sunday, the following Sunday rather, my mother was very nervous. She lived through one war already. And she was very nervous being so close to the border. And they were giving out-- that was later, yes.

So my father came home and said that it's going a train to the place where she was born. So it didn't take much at all, because usually it was a three, four-hour trip. Didn't even take any food with us. My father said, I will follow you. Because it was after the first of the month, he had to collect money. So he said, I will come after you to join you.

We were going to Dzialoszyce, what was a small town where my mother was born. And her older sister lived there. And the building belonged to my grandfather. So the whole family, by the time we got there-- finally, we got on the train. And middle, like one hour, in Wolbrom, we see fires from both sides. The Germans and the Poles are fighting.

It's gunfire, gunfire--

Gunfire--

On both sides.

And we are in the middle in the trains. My brothers were so hungry, we didn't have--

Sorry, the Germans one side, the Poles on the other, shooting at each other--

Shooting at each other.

And your train's right in the middle.

And the train is right in the middle. They made us get off. We run off the way. And we walked to a small town what my mother remember. A neighbor's parents lived there. I don't know how she found the house. I think-- I really don't remember.

So they opened the door for us, an old couple. Maybe they were not even my age at that time. But to me, they looked like a very old couple. Now, I'm not so old.

So the next morning, the knock on the door. And they asked-- the Germans, the police is there-- and said, [GERMAN]. Are there any men. So my mother spoke good German. And she said to him that we have an old man and a child. My brother was 11 years old.

So they left us. But we had to leave the house. We walked to the marketplace. It was people unbelievable, one on top of the other. And I remember, we saw so many people. Everybody who was running away was there. They couldn't go too far.

And my mother got hysterical because somebody came over and said they saw a car. One uncle of mine had a car. That was a big deal before the war in Poland to have a car. That they found a car and was blood in it. My mother got

hysterical that they shot her brother.

But we had to go on. So I don't remember how, but by horse and wagon we got to Dzialoszyce. When we arrived in Dzialoszyce, it was unbelievable. All my aunts were there. I belonged to one of the oldest grandchildren. So they were much younger.

These kids were so rotten spoiled, they had to go and put-- and force them to have to eat. Here, every three, four days in the war, everybody was crying hungry. They stood in the lines, the older people stood in line, 3 o'clock in the morning, to get some bread.

And there were so many of us. And I couldn't stand it because I missed my father. [SOBBING] So finally, after a couple months, somebody gave me a ride back home, just me. Didn't have room for everybody.

Back to Sosnowiec?

When I arrived back home in Sosnowiec, I didn't recognize my father. Did any of you see a picture of Gandhi when he was released from the prison? And my father was bald, and he looked like Gandhi. And I opened the credenza, and I couldn't believe my own eyes. The whole credenza was-- the part of it-- was with bread-- bread piled up. Penicillin was growing on it.

And I said to my father, for whom did you save that bread? He said, for my children. He didn't know when we are coming.

So he'd just been saving all this bread--

He used to get up at 3 o'clock in the morning and stay in line to get bread in case we come home that there's bread.

And then just save it waiting for you.

And he told me a story how he had to register, that came out a order. You see, the German immediately form a Jewish government, Jewish militia. And they were giving orders to them. And the first thing we were wearing armbands.

And we were-- was martial law applied. We were not allowed after 7 o'clock was still warm in September-- I mean this was later on. And we had in our building was nobody in my age. And I remember climbing fences to go three or four houses further to be with my age people.

My father was telling me how he had to go and register. And the registration was in the city hall. It was quite a long walk. And each time he came and he turned around. After a month, he arrived again. And it was called off.

But his fear was so big because the first day when the German marched in he had a beer with a friend. And as they were walking back home, the Germans were driving in on the motorcycles. And they yelled out, Halt.

And my father knocked at one building. All the entrances were closed. And they knew him because we used to live once in this building. And they let him in. His friend was shot on the spot. And my father never regained his composure, his fate, nothing, after that what happened to him.

I didn't recognize my father. He was afraid of his own shadow. I had to go out and bring news to him because we were not allowed to have radios. They were confiscating systematically everything. The beginning, furs and silver and electrical appliances.

Schools were obsolete for Jewish children. We were not-- I was the oldest one. My sister was eight, nine years old. She didn't even know hardly how to read yet. And we could for a while, my parents had a tutor. But later, they couldn't afford anymore to have a tutor for her.

Helen, tell us some-- I think in 1942, you've been under the Nazi domination for a while now. In 1942, you get forced into, I think you called it an open ghetto. Before you tell us about that, since your father lost his textile--

Excuse me, the open ghetto was applied right away.

Right away. Tell us how your father, since he lost his business right away, how did your father-- how did you make ends meet so that you could--

We were selling everything we could. But our disadvantage was whatever was valuable we took with us to the my grandfather's building, and we buried it in the basement. And we didn't have what to even sell. My mother had new silverware and everything. We didn't even have materials and things. Everything got robbed in there. And we didn't even have what to sell.

My mother started to sell something. And we went to work. At the age of 14, I had to have-- in order to get a ID card, you had to be working. Otherwise, you didn't get rations to eat. It what wasn't too much, meager rations.

So you had to go to work in order to get the rations.

Oh, yes. At 14, I worked in my uncle's factory. My father worked there. My brother worked there. My mother didn't work. And my sister was still too young. But at 14 years old, you had to have an ID card. That's what we have the ID cards here. This is--

Right, right.

And so I worked. And I guess we got paid something, not much. And also, I was a very bad eater. And I couldn't eat the margarine. The margarine tasted awful. We didn't have butter. We didn't--

So to take lunch to-- my poor mother, I feel very guilty until today still that my mother used to cook a soup for me, like a potato soup and thing and bring it to the factory for me because I couldn't eat the bread with that margarine. It used to make me sick. And put onions on it and tomatoes and still didn't help it.

If I remember correctly, Helen, you told me that obviously the rations you had were very meager anyway, and the Germans deliberately included pork as part of the rations.

The little meat what we used to receive they used to give us pork. And the majority of people were eating kosher meat. So my mother refused to cook it.

And so she gave me one part. And I used to go to her younger sister. She was-- and gave us a corner in the bedroom that my sister, my father and I ate. My brother and my mother refused to eat it. But my father used to say, in order to survive, we have to have strength. So God will forgive us.

And life was going on. Every day was always something, somebody. Many times I didn't sleep at home because they came middle of the night and took you out. They had list of people.

They had to-- the Jewish committee, the Jewish government has to supply the names. They just came and said, I need today 100 people. So they had to supply. So the militia used to come middle of the night take you out.

Many nights I slept in the factory on the cement floor because I had an uncle who worked in the central committee. And he knew when it was happening. So he used to send his son. And then he sent to warn us, his nieces.

And I-- once Henia came in and I said, when you afraid middle of the night if you go out a Jew, he took off his armband. And after they changed it to a Star of David because it wasn't visible enough with the armband. So we had one on the left side and one on the right side. They could see us for miles.

Eventually, life was getting worse and worse and worse. And the news, we didn't have any communication. We were not allowed to have radios. If somebody, two, three men listen to a radio, someone had to stay outside and watch out if a German policeman doesn't barge in and could kill you on the spot.

For having a radio to listen to?

That's right, to listen to a radio.

Helen, things were obviously so dire for you that at one point you went out-- actually went out to go collect-- Money.

--money that had been owed to your dad.

My father.

Very risky.

That was right in the beginning.

Tell us a little bit about that.

That was in February 1940. We didn't have any money at all. My father gave me a list of people what he trusted. And I went-- walked. [CRYING] That was the German border already. And I walked--

And the guard was very kind I have to say because he said, how old are you? So I said, I'm 13. At 14 you had to have that already.

ID card.

And he said, be back here by 6 o'clock because if the guard changes, he can make it very difficult for you. So I walked-- and I will never forget-- was in fields on both sides, snow hitting me. By the time I got home, my whole cheek was swollen. And I brought a few hundred marks home that day.

So you had actually crossed over the border into Germany--

That's right.

--to do this at age 13 years of age.

I took off because I was blonde, and I didn't look typical Semitic. And they-- and so my father let me go.

You, of course, continuing in these terrible conditions, they got worse because then you were forced into a really closed ghetto.

Yes. That was before they closed the ghetto. They came out with the order-- everybody has to come and register at the stadium. And there were 100,000 Jewish people at three different locations.

100,000?

100,000. We were over 30,000, maybe during the war 40,000, Bedzin and Dubrowa, my husband's hometown. And this was by streetcar it was, like from here to go to Bethesda or Rockville. That's what we had the distances.

And everybody got dressed to impress the Germans, the best. And tables were set up alphabetically. And my father said,



let's wait, let's wait, maybe they will get tired and they send us home.

We finally about 10 o'clock in the morning without any-- 10 o'clock in the evening without any food or anything--

Waiting there all day long.

All day long. We approached the table. And as we approached, they retained my parents. This horrible. [SOBBING] They retained my parents, my sister. And they said, took to me, to my brother and me, go home, raus.

Just you and your brother.

I started to cry. And I said, I don't want to go home. So my father gives me the key. He said, somebody has to survive. And he always later on, he told me, you are the one who will survive because you are pretty and you are smart.

So I remember that. I grew up with a lot of self-confidence because I was always always told that. And I am a great believer that to tell children too because some parents like to knock children. And I grew up that always giving me a lot of security.

So I cried and cried. And eventually, I got them out through connections. But it didn't last long. A year later to the date, we had to move to ghettos. They closed-- they put us--

The ghetto, they divided the population, the Jewish population, into A and B. And we got the B. So I wasn't satisfied--

The A and B ghettos, and you were in the B?

Yes, we went to B. The big ghetto was Srodula, what was A, on the outskirts of the city. But it wasn't enough room for so many people there. And we went to B.

So I wasn't satisfied. You had to leave everything behind. We-- got the kitchen and the two other rooms were two other families. Whatever you work all your life for, it was left. Life is important. Material things can be replaced.

I still feel like that. If I break something or my children break, I said, don't worry, it can be replaced. Everything we took, a table and chairs, two single beds, some pots and pans and some clothing. Everything else, what you work all your life for, was left behind.

And I wasn't satisfied with the conditions. So we had again somebody in the family who was in the housing. So I thought maybe I will lose some-- use pull. As I go into the committee, to the building, a militiaman recognize me. He said, what are you doing? He wasn't mean to me. He just wanted to protect me. He was a friend of my cousin.

We had like 500 people, relatives, in the city alone. And just six of us survived from all my mother's family and my fathers.

Out of 500.

500. Because my father had just one sister living in Poland. The rest went to Romania. So he approaches me. He said, what are you doing here? He said, oh, I want to talk to Mr. Greenfeld.

He said, look on the wall. Your name is on the wall. Go home.

And I didn't know that because with moving, we didn't get any information. So I didn't know that I'm already on the list. Because it was going by years, '26 were being called.

In a list to be deported?

Yes. So I come home. And my brother was also on the list. So he, my brother, wasn't home. So they took my mother as a hostage. Till today, I don't know if they killed my mother or she-- or she-- or they let her go. [SOBBING] That's what nags me all my older years because I don't know what happened to my mother.

So you came home only to find her gone because they had taken her--

No, this was after already we came home. I got them out.

Right.

And after they came, we moved to the ghetto. And when I moved to the ghetto, I went to the Jewish Community Center.

Right.

--and wanted to see if we can get better condition, living conditions.

And that's when you saw that your name was on the list.

Yes. And the militiaman said-- he knew me-- and he said, your name is on the list. You better go home. But when I arrived, my brother was on the list too. And because he wasn't home, they took my mother as hostage.

That's right.

And that was the last time--

You saw her.

I was six years old, [SOBBING] when I last saw my parents.

You said to me that was when-- you said, I was 16 and now all alone.

All alone. I was very frightened. And when they brought in-- and the place where they gathered us was my private school. And I attached myself to my cousin's friends. They were a little bit older than I because I didn't know-- the first time I was away in my life from my parents.

And they sent me to Gogolin. And then Gogolin, they-- the lice completely-- that was a temporary camp for sick people. So we slept-- I was just came home. My mother gave me flannel night shirts. I never was wearing night shirts. But I was always wearing pajamas. But my mom to keep warm, to be warm. So she gave me. As the first night, I took off the night shirt. And the seams were full of lice.

Full of lice.

Because we didn't have mattresses and beds. It was straw in it, sacks with straw. And it was infested already with lice. So the first moment I left home, I was already--

And from there, they picked their merchandise. We were lined up. And a man with a cane, I remember, he was the buyer. And he came to pick his merchandise.

And so I started to cry I wanted to go to other, with Bella and Gutchat and Marisa.

Your cousins?

No, they were not my cousins.

No, just friends?

They were my cousins' friends. And I came to Gleiwitz.

So you were-- this man picked you to be a slave laborer for him.

Yes.

Yes.

We all went there. We gathered together, stuck together in order to be able to go together. I arrive in Gleiwitz. It was a nightmare. This was a concentration camp-- at the time was a labor camp. They were building a big factory. The factory was-- we were producing soot, black stuff from fine coal and oil.

Every machine was gigantic, as long as this here. And under 120 degrees, in order to have production from the oil and the-- it was a chemical factory. And they called it Deutsche Gasrusswerke. And they built it especially in Gleiwitz because the original factory was in Dortmund. DÃ¼sseldorf or Dortmund? Dortmund?

DÃ¼sseldorf.

DÃ¼sseldorf. And somebody told us that after-- recently-- they built because the planes at the time couldn't reach so far to the Polish border because Gleiwitz was on the border, Polish border. Now Gleiwitz belongs to Poland, shifting the borders. Now it's Poland. The factory still exists. I was there. And--

And the factory still makes soot all these years--

That's right, the same production. But the people work much less hours.

Right.

They get better food. They send them to resorts, to vacation. It's completely different conditions.

When you were there, you were slave labor--

12 hours labor. And we're sleeping on straw again in barracks with the pail outside because you couldn't even go out to the outhouse because you could be shot on the way, that maybe you try to escape. And life was miserable.

The soup was made from spinach and water. And you could taste the sand in between-- it never was washed properly. And life was going on in order that every other-- there were three shifts actually, eight hours, but on the weekends were two shifts-- in order that one shift will be Sunday off, we had to work 12 hours. Under 100--

So 8 hours a day, Monday through Friday, then 12 hour shifts Saturday and Sunday.

Saturday and Sunday. We never had-- every third Sunday was off.

Every third Sunday.

The temperature, it was the worst thing. 120 degrees had to be. And you had to with a poker clean the pilots. There were 12 windows in each machine and 12 machines. And all the-- like this auditorium, so long-- and by the time you finish cleaning the pilots, you had to start from the beginning.

And on the one machine was a bag, cement bag, to weight the production. So used to go to the front to the scales and weigh it. We looked-- we were wearing special clothes. And they gave us good soap, because otherwise we wouldn't have skin left. And oil to wash our eyes. I didn't need mascara at that time. My eyes were always black. And life was

miserable.

And it got worse there.

Got worse because a year later, the SS took over. We became a concentration camp, a branch of Auschwitz. And I want to tell you, in order, they took away all our civilian clothes. We were wearing the stripes. We didn't have shoes. We were wearing wooden clogs. Standing sometimes on roll calls for two hours if one person was missing. And you try to-- wintertime-- to wrap your feet with paper to keep warm. When you came for the roll call, you had to remove it. Otherwise, they would hit you and maybe kill you.

So, Helen, just so everybody understands, this horrible place was a slave labor camp. And it just horrible. But then, then it becomes a subcamp of Auschwitz and the SS take over.

That's right.

And what is horrible becomes even more unimaginable.

Worse. Because in order to tattoo to us-- we had to have the tattoo like in Auschwitz-- we had to stand completely naked like God created us in front of three SS men. It wasn't a physical pain. It was a moral pain. You felt like you are branded like an animal. You lost all your dignity, all your pride. You became an animal.

And that was-- it's all physical. I removed that eventually because a lot of people ask me why I did it, if I was ashamed. I'm not ashamed [SOBBING] of it. Otherwise, I would never admit it. By my accent, anybody could tell right away who I am.

But because people were very, very ignorant when I arrived in America, they kept asking. Like summertime, I was wearing short sleeves. And people used to ask me if it's my Social Security number, my dance number, my laundry number. I used to put a Bandaid all the time.

And when my first child was born, he, was reading at 22 months. And he kept asking me when he will have a number. So I read in the paper-- that was during the Korean War-- that they have a new-- soldiers who had burns on their faces, they use a new method, sandpapering.

So I went to the doctor who wanted previously to remove it, but I wasn't ready mentally for it. And he tried, but it was too deep in the muscle. So he was drilling like a dentist. And they gave me a local. And the nurse was just patting the blood. But I'm not sorry I did it.

But that's how you had it removed.

That's how I had it removed.

Helen, in the midst of all that just unimaginable awfulness there at Gleiwitz, something good happened.

Well, yes. [LAUGHS]

Tell us about that good thing that happened.

What good thing, I had my eye on my husband in my hometown because his cousin was my friend. And she pointed him out once. And I said, I want to meet him. So she never introduced me. But he was always mechanically inclined, and he worked in a factory in my hometown.

So once a man who went to work where he was working in that shop. And I said, would you bring him over here that I can meet him? And one day, I was sitting at the machine across from my cousin, the one whose picture was here, Hadassa. And we started to giggle because we saw him coming in.

And he didn't know why we're giggling. He brings him over to the machine. And he said, didn't say anything. He looked at the machine. He doesn't remember. He said, I saw two young girls giggling. That's all what he remember. That's how much attention he paid to me. [LAUGHTER] I'm watching like he said--

But you--

But when I came to camp, we ran out once of water. And I went in-- it was a back door. It was a fence between the women's camp and the men's camp. And we didn't have water. So I needed water. And I went into the men's wash barrack. And he was there washing his clothes.

Willy was there washing his clothes.

Yes. He was sleeping-- he wash, he kept very clean. And see, the only one pair of pants he had, and these were the striped pants, and he used to sleep on them to have a crease, the pants. It was very important. [LAUGHS]

And a friend of his introduced me to him. And from that time on, he was coming to the fence. We just had a relationship through the fence.

And to get water?

Water, just only one time I went there because after we had our own water. And--

So you just talk through the fence.

Through the fence we talk. Once they caught me that I was talking to him. And the German woman come-- no, that was SS man standing up the hill watching us, comes in. I was-- my barrack was right by the fence, the first one. And he comes into the room, to the barrack. And he said, I counted five people standing and speaking by the fence. And so he said, if they don't come forward, every fifth woman will have shaven their heads.

So I felt very guilty about it because some women, there were older people already, like 30 years old. And most of us were still teenagers. And I said, they never spoke to a man. Why should they be punished? So I came forward.

And I said-- because I was such a brave Jewess, they took me by the neck and threw me out. And I went to the next barrack and cried my eyes out. Why should people-- I'm going back. She didn't let me. She was after shift sleeping. And I didn't.

But the next day, we all had to go to work. The solidarity and the comradeship was so-- and so everybody, we had like a triangle and made a turban. And the people who did had shaven their heads, they made a little lock out, and everybody had a little lock out, that the man watching us, and especially him, he thought, I was caught and they shaved my head. They couldn't tell.

Because you put a little bit of hair--

A little lock out. And everybody had a black turban on to protect our hair from that soot.

From the soot.

They gave us the triangles to put on our heads.

So no one knew who was shaved and who wasn't. Helen, I know time is getting short. And we want to get to some other points I know very much. In early 1945, of course, then things change again, and you're forced out of Gleiwitz.

That's right.

Tell us about that.

But because we didn't have any communication, we didn't have any news, because if we would know-- Europe was already liberated. Central Europe was liberated in June 1944. And this was-- more people died in these five months from January to May than maybe through the whole time.

And we marched. They evacuated us. Everybody got a piece of bread and a blanket. And also, they opened the magazines with our clothing what they took away. But I was very naive. And I said, I don't want any civilian clothes because I wanted-- the Allies will bomb, they will see that I'm a prisoner.

Because they'll see you in your striped outfit.

That's right. Because I could see--

The planes.

The planes, very high up, silver planes. And they were standing-- and we used to lay on the ground. And the Germans wanted us because they needed our manpower for the war efforts. So they wanted us to go to bunkers. But I was praying and thinking, please, send a bomb already to end my misery because [SOBBING] it was getting worse and worse.

And we marched for three days. They didn't know what to do with us. They didn't have trains for their own soldiers. But they had trains for us. Like I read just something-- my daughter had mentioned that Elie Wiesel said, trains mean different things to different people.

To us, trains-- it's the same, I have a friend-- and I'm getting off a little bit, like to give you an example-- in Cleveland, in the old age home, they call her, please to come and help them because the people refuse to take showers. And most of them were survivors. Because if you say shower to a survivor, especially old people, they get frightened. They think that the showers-- I hope that most of you know what the shower meant, that you never came out. Was cyclone behind the walls. And they lost their lives.

So trains mean different things to us too. So they put us on open cattle trains. That was to our benefit because people who were like my parents, what was a short ride to Auschwitz, and most people who went long train ride, they suffocated in meantime. But we were in open cattle trains. Can you imagine, January 1945?

In open cars.

Open cattle trains. The only thing-- no food. How long does it last a piece of bread? No food at all. And we each had a blanket. And we gathered the snow from each other's blanket. We had water at least.

And people were jumping-- was no room even to crouch down. You had to sleep standing up. But the unfortunate, after a week was more room. People were dying. And we were throwing them overboard.

We were passing Czechoslovakia. And we saw the destruction. I couldn't believe it. The destruction of Germany passing Berlin. We went from one end to the other. From the complete south to the complete north they dragged us. And was more room to stand up, and you could at least sit down on the floor.

They unloaded the men in Oranienburg. And I saw him. I jump on that first train wagon were women. And he was on the last wagon man. So we could at least see each other. Because once they opened the gates and they let us mingle. And he said to me, you see, you will survive and I will marry you.

And I thought he lost his marbles. I touch his forehead. I thought he has a high temperature. So much hope I had left. And--

So you were on the first women's car and he was on the last men's car.

But when I saw him I jumped on that. They didn't let me. Wasn't room. But I jumped in.

And once we were passing Czechoslovakia-- it's a famous tape made by CBS. They call it "The Bread Story." And the Czech people were standing on the bridges throwing bread. So he-- it was an open cattle train-- he puts the blanket across that not to hurt himself. And he stretched out his arms and caught a bread. Do you know what a bread meant that time? Unbelievable.

So he caught a bread by reaching out over that. Somebody had thrown, one of the Czechs had thrown--

Yes, they were throwing. And he hold it like that in the air. That bread meant more than today \$1,000,000. He couldn't say, please, pass it to Helen. Everybody was hungry, like vultures. So he said to me, stretch out your arms. I stretch my arms out. And guess what? It fell between the two wagon. He never forgave me till today. [LAUGHTER]

They unloaded us. And they took him off. And I remember him gathering some dirty snow. And I slapped him over the hands. And I said don't eat it, you will get sick. And he had that lost look. He looked at me like I'm crazy.

And they put us on other trains, took us to Ravensbrück.

So you were separated then.

Yeah, completely. No, we were separate before too--

No, but completely. Now--

I'm physically.

--you have no idea where he is now.

We came to Ravensbrück. And I found out the good news. Because the whole-- we were on the same transport with Auschwitz. And I saw there were 32,000 women in Ravensbrück. The furnaces didn't work anymore. And we were five people sleeping on a thing like that.

I had a piece of bread till somebody stole it from-- I kept it under my head. Somebody stole it. And it was-- I met some people who knew my parents from my hometown. And they told me, one girl, Renia Ostrah, she said, I saw your father going to the gas chambers. So I knew what to expect.

But after I was liberated-- I was liberated by the Russians. I was sick. It's too long of a story to tell. We don't have as much time. German farmers invited us. We were walking already because I saw the civilians walking too. It was no order anymore. And they invited us on a Farm

And when I saw she prepared the dinner, which consisted of a pitcher of milk, mashed potatoes, and a pitcher of branded pork. And when I saw that combination, I couldn't tolerate food anymore, threw up. And I wind up in the hospital.

The only regret I have still is that I didn't see the actual liberation because I was in the hospital, and I don't remember anything because I had a high temperature. But it was liberated by the Russians. The Russians were forcing everybody to leave. And the Americans-- the Russians were disarming everything possible in Germany and sending us.

So I was in a villa because they sent us to recuperate. And at the window, I saw two Soviet Russian. And one was a captain. So very casually I said, through the window to him, I said-- oh, yes, we were afraid that they can come-- we put quarantine on the front door because we're afraid the Russians can come in and rape us. So that was our protection.

So you put quarantine--

On that front door. And he said-- I ask him if he's Jewish if he could help us. And he didn't answer. So the middle of the night, he knocked at the door and said, I didn't want to admit to it when I was here with my comrade, but, yes, what can I do for you?

He was a Russian officer.

Yes. A captain.

Captain.

And he arranged for us to be when they were dismantling, and on the trucks they took us to Stettin, all four of us. And I came-- because I wanted to go back to Poland, because I thought maybe my brother survived. But unfortunate, [SOBBING] when I arrived, nobody was there. And that's how it ended. But we still didn't know if-- I didn't know if he is alive or not.

Five minutes-- oh, I know how. Finally, after two months being in Poland-- I will talk fast now-- being in Poland, we decided to leave Poland because it was too painful. And they wanted to draft me to the military. I said, I'm not, I'm leaving.

The Polish army wanted to draft you?

Yes. Yes. And I found three cousins who survived. And we all went back to Germany under the American occupation.

But on the way, they arrested us because we didn't have visas. We didn't have passports. We didn't have tickets. We didn't have money, nothing.

And they retained us in a school in Bratislava. And my cousin's fiancée left, went back to Prague, made arrangements, came back for us. We went back to Prague.

As I am stepping on the streetcar at 6 o'clock with a bottle of vodka-- that was the Russians were still in Czechoslovakia-- to go--

And you had a bottle of vodka in your arm?

Everybody had a bottle of vodka to go--

To bribe them.

To bribe them, to go through the border to Germany. And somebody recognized me and calls my name. She said, do you know I saw Willy? I said, where did you see? She was from Prague.

And she said, and the Jewish-- what was it-- Joint Distribution. That was a Jewish organization. And so I started to cry. I didn't want to go any further. But my cousin's fiance promised that he would be back in Prague. And he came and couldn't find him.

I thought he was working there. He was visiting somebody because he had a special permit to bring people over the border to--

Willy did?

Yes. Yes. A lieutenant governor, American, in Bayreuth. And he gave him the permits. And he used to drag people on his shoulders for nothing to bring them because a lot of people were leaving from Russia and Poland to come to the



American zone in Germany because that was a window to the world. You could immigrate any place.

If you could get into the American zone.

And that's how-- and finally, we found each other. And we got-- when I saw him-- I sent him a little note where he can find me because I met some people who knew him in a different city. It's complicated. Nothing was easy.

And we got married. And my marriage-- we got married. I had to cook for 50 people and myself. I didn't have any parents, nobody to do it for me. And my dress was borrowed. And my white shoes were nurse's shoes. We used to get packages from America. And this was my outfit to get married.

And such a beautiful photograph of you and Willy.

And after we came in 1949 to America. And I'm grateful. I have to--

Helen, let me just halt for just a moment and say that, we're obviously almost at the end. And we're not going to have time for questions. And we're sorry about that. But as you see, there is just so much to cover. And what Helen just described after the war ended in a matter of moments, we could be up here for the rest of the afternoon hearing it. But I knew you'd want to hear about how she and Willy reconnected.

Before I turn back to Helen, I'd like to remind you that we do "First Person" every Wednesday until August 27. So we'll have another "First Person" next week, which is July 16, again at 1 o'clock.

And our first person next week will be Mr. Morris Rosen. He was born in Poland as well. And after the Nazi invasion of Poland. He was forced into slave labor. He survived several Nazi camps. And after death March, he was taken to the Theresienstadt camp before his liberation. So we'd invite you to come back if you can possibly next Wednesday, or any Wednesday until August 27.

It's our tradition at "First Person" that our "First Person" has the last word. And I'd like to turn it now back to Helen to close our program.

With today's war, so many wars are today, but the wars are not anymore political. They are religious wars. And I'm very grateful to the American government for allowing us to come here, to educate my children, and to be useful citizens, and to be able to help others.

And I want to finish the famous quotation by Pastor Niemoeller. "First they 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 Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me. And by that time, there was no one left to speak up for me."

So remember, young people, you live in a wonderful country. You have all the opportunities and to learn because I am afraid history repeats itself. And you have to learn from experience. It's very difficult for us, all survivors, to speak about it. But we feel maybe we were left for purpose. And I want to leave you with a message to listen and to hear and to vote. This is a privilege to be American. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]