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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. Today, We are delighted to begin our fifth season of First Person.

Our first first person for this year is Mrs. Tania Rozmaryn, and we shall meet Tania 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 at the museum.

Each Wednesday through August 25, we will have a First Person guest. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a preview of upcoming First Person guests. This 2003 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of both the William Goldring and Woldenberg Foundation and the Helena Rubinstein Foundation, to whom we are grateful for sponsoring this year's Program

Tania Rozmaryn will share 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 Tania some questions. Before you are introduced to her, I have a couple of requests of you.

First, if possible, please stay in your seats during the program so that we minimize any disruptions while Tania is speaking. And second, please make your questions in the question and answer period as brief as you can. I will repeat the question as best I can so that Tania hears the question and everybody in the audience does, as well. I'd also like to let those of you with passes for the permanent exhibition today know they are good for the balance of the afternoon.

The Holocaust was a 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, Tania was 11 when the war broke out. She spent her teenage years surviving life in several ghettos, a concentration camp, as a slave laborer, and a death march before being liberated and spending time in a displaced persons camp. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Tania's introduction.

Our first map is a map of Europe, and our arrow points to Poland. Our next arrow points to Vilna, where Tania was born. Tania grew up in Smorgonie, a town where Jews constituted more than half of the population. And our first photograph, it's an engagement photograph of Yaakov Marcus and Cyla Danishevska, Tania's parents. Yaakov Marcus was a successful businessman who sold farming equipment and purchased flax for export.

Our next photo, a group photo, these are members of the Danishevska family-- Tania's mother's relatives. Tania's maternal grandmother is sitting second from the left, and her maternal grandfather is standing also second from the left. In our next photo, Tania is pictured here with her Jewish kindergarten class in Smorgonie, Poland. Tania's family took part in Smorgonie's vibrant Jewish culture, attended the theater, and hosted discussions about art in their home. Tania is in the very front on the right hand side in a reclining position.

On September 1, 1939, German troops invaded Poland, triggering World War II. 16 days later, Soviet armies drove in from the East and occupied Smorgonie. In the second photograph, German and Soviet military officers signed the agreement by which Poland was partitioned between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939. By 1941, the German army invaded the Soviet Union and occupied Smorgonie.

Tania's family tried to escape, but were captured. Her family was forced to move into the Smorgonie ghetto, and were later transported to the Kovno ghetto. And in this map of Europe that's up next, our arrow points to the location of Kovno.

Next, we have a photograph of Jewish women returning to the Kovno ghetto after forced labor on the outside. They line up to be searched by German and Lithuanian guards. Our next photo shows the deportation of Jews from the Kovno

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ghetto.

Our next map is a map of the camps throughout Europe. Tania, her mother, and older sister were evacuated to the Stutthof concentration camp and were sent on a death march in January 1945. Our arrow points to the location of the Stutthof concentration camp. Later, they were liberated by Soviet troops.

And in our final photograph, Tania became a Hebrew teacher in several Jewish displaced persons camps in Germany and emigrated to the United States in 1950. In the photograph, Tania joins her students in a Friday night celebration in the Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp. And Tania is on the left of the circle.

Today, Tania resides in the Washington DC area. Although she recently retired from teaching high school students at a Jewish school, she continues seeing clients as a therapist. I might mention she also said that she still substitutes. They call, I go. Great attitude.

Like Bart Giamatti, the former baseball commissioner, Tania's fond of both baseball and the opera. Tania and her husband, Larry, have recently enjoyed a great deal of travel together. She has two sons, both of whom also live in this area, and seven grandchildren. And with that, let's welcome our first person, Tania Rozmaryn.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you very much, Mr Benson--

Thank you, Tania, and welcome to--

--for the kind introduction.

--First Person. Thank you. It's great to have you on the First Person program to start our new season. We're very excited about this.

Right. And good afternoon. Thank you very much to the wonderful audience that we have here today.

Tania, you were born in Poland and lived with your family in the small town of Smorgonie when the Germans-- excuse me, the Russians occupied your part of Poland while the Germans were invading Poland from the west in September 1939. You were an 11-year-old child at the time. Tell us, to begin, Tania, about your life in those years before the war. What was life like in your community, your family, and for you as a child?

Right, thank you. Like you have noticed before, I was born in Vilna, which is now the capital of Lithuania. But my parents lived in a small town in Smorgon, and the population was-- the Jewish population in that little town was, I would say, higher than the other people who lived there.

The Baltic countries had a Jewish population since the 14th, beginning 15th century. I'm talking about Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and they were invited by the kings in those times to help them out with economy, to help them develop those countries. And the Jews settled in those towns, and they were called shtetl-- little shtetlach.

And it all depended on the king or the ruler. If the ruler was good and nice, he let the Jews alone. If not, there were pogroms. There were killings and annihilations. But in the shtetlach where the Jewish people resided, it was-- I call it sometimes inside the cocoon and outside the cocoon.

Outside, of course, it was very, very difficult. Even as a little girl, I used to be-- I was attacked by non-Jewish boys in the summer when I went down to the river which was down the hill from my house. Or in the winter when it froze over and I tried to go skating, they would beat me up. And there were pogroms very, very, very frequent.

But inside the cocoon, in the Jewish community, was a very good life. Most of the Jewish people were poor, but those that were wealthier, my father including, supported all kinds of Jewish institutions-- orphanages, old age homes, a

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cultural center, a private school. And there was a lot of Jewish culture. There were lectures. There was a Jewish theater.

And I experienced as a child, of course, I knew that I have to be careful to go outside. But inside was a warm and wonderful atmosphere.

Tania, you spoke about all the things that your father did for the community. But at home, you had an especially close relationship with your father, didn't you?

Yes. My father was, as I mentioned, a very wealthy businessman there. He had two businesses. One he sold the farming equipment, and we were surrounded by farmers all along. And he would deal with flax, or there were people who sorted it, and pressed it. And there was even a rail line that came to the plant, and he was exporting it.

But whenever he came home, he always had time for me, for my sister, and I had a little brother. He would take me on his knee and ask me what I learned, and then take me for a ride on his bicycle on the handles, or he would teach me later on how to ride a bike. In the winter, he got me skis, and we went skiing all over the area. He was a wonderful, wonderful father, dedicated. No matter how busy he was, home, his wife the children came first.

I enjoyed you telling me that your father purchased the first truck ever in your town, but then had to find a driver.

Oh, right. It was for the business that we needed-- the business needed the truck. And so he purchased the first truck, and it came into our town. It was a big, beautiful, shiny blue Chevrolet, and everybody in town came looking and touching. There was no gasoline station, and nobody knew how to drive it. And he brought a chauffeur from Germany with his wife, gave them a house, and the truck was his baby.

Whenever he needed gasoline he would go to Vilna, which was 40 miles away, and get gasoline. And then take care of the business. So it was good-- it was a bittersweet life until 1939, September 1.

That's right, and everything changed so dramatically then. Tell us what happened to your family once the Russians occupied your town in 1939.

Well, the first thing the Russians did is they-- we lived in a big house, so they confiscated a few rooms for Russian soldiers. The second thing, of course, they confiscated my father's businesses and they sent my father every day manual work. He used to go to the forest, and whenever he came home I would see his calluses on his hand. But he maintained his good spirit and his love and dedication to the children and the family.

And my beautiful school which was initially a private school was converted to a Russian public school, and everything has changed. And because my father was considered to the Russians as a bourgeois because of his wealth and businesses, we knew that eventually they would be sending us to Siberia, which that's what they did to people that were of wealth, of means.

And at one point, you were then told your father was being shipped to Siberia.

Right. A few days it was been, and middle of June, someone told us that my father and my mother were on the list to be shipped to Siberia. And I remember my mother prepared these backpacks for everybody with-- she dried bread, and of course, at that time we still had-- I remember golden coins and jewelry. And my mother sewed it in into the coats. And we were ready for the Russians to come and take us to the train and to be shipped to Siberia.

However, this was before the 22nd of June of 1941. We were all ready and set to be shipped out. And then in the morning of June 22, we saw the German planes flying over town, and throwing, bombs and shooting at people.

So this is when the Germans turned on the Russians and occupied this part of Poland?

Exactly. When the Germans broke their agreement with Stalin, and they occupied the west of Poland. And they took over Poland, which was, in essence, Belarus, like Russia.

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So as bad as things were under the Russians, they turned unimaginably worse quickly under the Germans.

Well, immediately they were shooting at random at anybody, and then my father felt that we should run. My mother, myself, my sister, and I had a little brother at that time. He was 7, and we started running. My father still had a bicycle.

And then as we were running towards Russia-- and I'm sure that you have seen these kind of pictures, people with their backpacks running away from danger over bridges, and fields, and forests. And then they would swoop down with the planes and start shooting at us, and we would run into the corn fields and then come out and run again until they caught up with us in a little town, Lebedev.

And we found relatives there, and we went in. They took us in, and we stayed with them for a while until my parents decided, since the Germans had already occupied Smorgon, our town, my parents decided that my mother, my sister, and I should go back home and see if it would be safe for my father and my brother to come back.

Before we move on from there, Tania, tell us about the radio broadcast that you heard with Hitler which was very-- it was a very ominous message that was [CROSS TALK].

There was-- actually, I just want to finish up this event. So my mother, my sister, and I, we went back on foot. Sometimes somebody gave us a ride back to Smorgon, and my father remained in that little town. And a few days later, they collected all the men my father's age and older. They didn't take children, and they took them out of town. And my father was killed right a week or two after the war broke out in the 22nd of June, '41.

Now, you reminded me of an incident that-- what was it? You heard a broadcast on the radio.

Right. We had a radio at home, and my parents spoke German. And they would listen to what Hitler had to say. And of course, nobody believed that he said he's going to implement his ideas and his plans in Mein Kampf. But at one point, as a matter of fact, this week the Jewish people will be celebrating a holiday which is called Purim.

And this holiday, we celebrate to remember the deliverance of the Jewish people, actually, in Iraq. When Haman decided to kill all the people, the Jews and through the Queen Esther, they were saved. So we'll be celebrating this holiday this week, and I remember my parents talking about hearing on the radio Hitler made a speech. And he probably was very much knowledgeable of the Jewish customs and the Jewish religion.

And he said, you Jews are not going to have another Purim after me. And even though those of us who got the message, like my father was a very smart man. But there was no place to go and no place to hide.

After your father was killed, what happened to the family then?

Well, we came back I remember my mother came back, and she told us that-- she brought my brother back and she told us that the father was killed. And we were crying. I still remember I felt that my heart would explode out of anger, out of that I missed him. I missed him so much, and I loved him. And I knew I would never ever see him again.

And we mourned after my father. But as we came back to our house, the house was empty. Our non-Jewish neighbors cleaned everything out from the house, and my mother begged them at least to give us back a mattress so that we could sleep on. And we stayed there in our house for a few weeks, and then they formed a ghetto around the synagogue in our town.

And so you were forced into this ghetto in Smorgonie.

Yes.

And were there a little while, but then you were forced to leave that ghetto. And where were you taken?

We were forced in the ghetto of Smorgon, and then that's what must have been in June, or the beginning of July, or middle of July. And then in October 1941, I was sent to a labor camp. They gathered over 270 young people to-- it was called Å½ieÅ¾mariai, not far from Kovno. It was in Lithuania, and they took us to a labor camp to build a highway to connect Kovno and Vilna.

Tania, when I first talked to you and you were telling me this, you said, I'm an expert on building highways. And it was because of that slave labor?

Right. Now, every morning, they would send us out, and we would get to there where the highway was to be built. And the first thing, of course, it was after it was planned, we would go up with wheelbarrows and spread sand. And after that, wheelbarrows with pointed rocks, and put one next to the other. And then some men were sitting and chopping up their rocks into smaller, like pebbles, which was brought on top and spread over the rocks. And the little pebbles would fall in between the rocks.

And then they would spread tar with a steamroller. And that section was done. When that was done, we would move on further.

And you were roughly 13 years of age?

Right.

The German soldiers that were supervising that, you told me they were Todt officers. Tell us about that.

Well, they were not SS officers. Although when we first came to that camp, the following morning, and it was a synagogue that they had placed. If you visited the exhibit, you have seen those three tier bunks in the synagogue. Everything, they sort of removed everything for the women. And then in the same area, they had for men built barracks.

And the following morning, we came-- they called us for roll call. And they asked nonchalantly, is anyone here that feels weak, or feels that he could not work? We'll take you back home. And like 20 some people volunteered. They took them away, and then we heard shots in the forest.

And these weren't SS. These were the logistics-- Einsatzgruppen for the Germans, which they were building roads, and barracks, highways. And basically, otherwise they didn't kill us since that first time.

But I was lucky because as we were going to the train station, my mother came out because she had a pass. Because she worked for the Germans when they were-- the soldiers were coming on transit. So she was there cleaning and helping out.

And I remember her walking next to the head of the TOD, the chief, and she gave him the jewelry or gold pieces, and she pointed to me that I'm a little girl. And he should have pity on me, which he was rather nice to me, yes.

You had a very, very frightening encounter. You were taken-- and tell us the story about how you were taken by horse and buggy to another town and what happened then.

Right. Yeah, at one point, when I was in the Å½ieÅ¾mariai, the chief came to me. He said that they were going to the town where my mother was transferred from the original ghetto, from Smorgon, to another ghetto in Oszmiana, and my brother, my grandfather. And he told me we're going there, we'll get food for the people of Å½ieÅ¾mariai.

And he said, it's safe for you to go. Don't worry. If it wasn't safe I would not take you because I sort of have a special feeling for you. And I went. It was December, and we got there. My mother came and picked me up in the evening. We were supposed to return in the morning.

And then I had tonsillitis, maybe 104 fever. I couldn't go. And someone else there-- there was an orphan girl who had a sister there. She heard about it and she begged my mother to let her go in my place because he had to bring the same

amount of people back. And my mother gave her food and clothing. She went and I stayed, that was in December of '41.

And I stayed-- we stayed in that ghetto. And it was in the summer, July or August in '42. I was walking with my friends in that ghetto, and then I saw the chief from Å½ieÅ¾mariai ghetto came in, and he saw me. He called me over, kleine, with was little girl. He says, go tell your mother to pack up everything and come tomorrow to the gate. I'm taking you to Å½ieÅ¾mariai-- back to Å½ieÅ¾mariai, and my sister had been there already in that labor camp.

And I went and I told my mother and she packed up. And the following morning we were at the gate, and they were Polish peasants with their wagons. And they were supposed to take us to a train station so that we could proceed back to Å½ieÅ¾mariai. And on the way, the farmer passed by his house in the village-- the one that was driving us. And all his family, they all came out with pitchforks and axes. They were ready to kill us and to take all the whatever we had in that wagon.

But my mother was very, very brave. She jumped off the wagon. She ran down to the town-- to the village and she saw two Germans. And there was not much love between the Germans and the Polish farmers. And she told them what happened. They came over to that farmhouse, they drew the guns, and they forced them to put everything back. And they told him, you better take them to the station or we'll kill you all.

So it was a miracle. And there are many, many more miracles. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here to share with you my experiences.

I wish we had the time to stop for a good while at every one of the places that Tania describes, but we can't. So in 1943, Tania, that's when you moved to the Kovno ghetto.

Right. Actually, it was not in our religion that we moved. We were in Å½ieÅ¾mariai, and then the Russian front was getting closer. So the Germans tried to liquidate all these labor camps. And every morning, they would send trucks to gather the people and to ship them away.

And this chef really saved us. Whenever somebody-- a truck came, he would tell my mother, wait, don't go. Don't go. It's a certain death. And then one morning, we saw trucks come in, and we saw men jump out of the trucks. And they were wearing armbands-- white with blue stars of David, and we didn't know who they were.

And he came over to my mother. He says, it's OK for you to go now. These are policemen from the Kovno ghetto, and they came to take you to the Kovno ghetto. And then we went-- they took us to the Kovno ghetto.

You described to me, Tania, that the Kovno ghetto was not like our images of the ghettos-- that it was different.

Correct.

Can you talk a little bit about that?

Correct, yes. The Kovno ghetto, the police and whoever was there, they were like 20,000 Jews in the ghetto. They were all dedicated there to help the Jewish people, whether it was to break the fence and to connect with partisans, or to let people out to barter with the outside world. Or when we came from work and the Germans and Lithuanians, like you saw in the picture, they would check our pockets and all over if we bring anything in. And they would divert them. So if anybody had something to bring in, whether potatoes, or carrots, or something, they would let us through.

And they were very, very, very supportive and very helpful, especially to everybody and to us that we came from Å½ieÅ¾mariai, and we were strangers. And they were very extraordinarily good to us.

Tell us some about one particular extraordinary moment when you escaped detection, really, by another miracle, finding a way to hide in a cellar. Tell us about that.

Right. We were in the-- yes, it started out, we were in the synagogue on a mattress-- my mother, my sister, my brother,

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myself. And a policeman from the Jewish-- from the ghetto, a Jewish policeman came in with a little note. And he said, I'm looking for a family, two families, Marcus and Yablonovitch. ? And my maiden name is Marcus.

My mother got up, and she was very scared. And she asked him what it is all about. And he said, don't worry. I am from the-- from the police, but we have a room for you. You don't need to be here in the synagogue anymore.

There is a lady with a son who has two rooms, and we are taking you and the other two sisters, Yablonovitch, to that house. And the lady will accommodate you. And we were absolutely shocked because my mother did not register. We didn't know anybody there. It was just like they decided to pick out two families, and they picked us.

And we were there in that house, and that was a few months later. We got up, and the Germans surrounded the ghetto. Nobody was going in or out, and we saw that that was going to be some kind of an aktion.

And so the lady-- we saw the Germans going from house to house, and the lady said to us, you know what? I have a cellar here. I have a trap door. Those of you who saw Schindler's List will remember that's exactly how it was. In the kitchen, she had a trap door.

She said, let's go down to the cellar, and I have a rug over the trap door. And we'll hold on by the straps, and then it will-- nobody will notice that this is an entrance to a cellar. And we went down, and we held on. And we heard the Germans come and walk around, and they were surprised that they couldn't find anybody. And they left.

The following morning, we found out that they gathered 5,000 people. And of course, the easy picking was those that were in the synagogue and those that were in the movie house. And all my relatives, they were all at that time, they were taken out from Kovno and sent to Auschwitz. The two families, us and the other two sisters, survived from all the people that came from that labor camp from Å½ieÅ¾mariai.

In that one night, that one aktion, they took 5,000 people.

5,000, yes.

Tania, tell us about Nathan.

I had a little brother who was born in 1933, and here we were in Kovno. He was 9 and 1/2 years old, and he was a very kind and a very wonderful, wonderful boy. Whenever we had something to cook or prepare, and we were sent to work-- my mother, my sister, myself-- he would cook for us and prepare. And one morning, we got up and they told us that we must announce that everybody has to go to work.

But we showed that something bad was going to happen in the ghetto. Because as we were working, I worked in a-- I was very fortunate. Again, the people from Kovno were good to us. They saw we're little girls, so they didn't send me to work outside. They sent me to a factory where they produced galoshes, so it was warm. It was inside.

Around noontime, we heard that the Germans went into the ghetto and they took out children and elderly people. And when we came home, we came into our room, and all the neighbors greeted us crying and tearing their hair. And they are relatives, and they-- my little brother, Nathan, was gone. And we know they took them to a fort like five miles out of the Kovno ghetto and they killed all these children and the elderly.

The following day, they didn't let us go to work. They were going to mop up and to clean up. At that time, we lived already in a building that-- in a two story building with many families in a room. And my mother was afraid that they would grab me. I was little, and I was young, and I was very skinny.

She puffed up my hair, and put lipstick on me, and put blush on my cheeks, and gave me to wear her high heeled shoes. And we were looking out the window, and we saw the German trucks coming and stopping by the entrances. There were two entrances to the building, and we were on the second floor. And they were coming in to look for children or elderly people that they missed.

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And then as they were approaching our entrance, they heard children cry. And they walked into one of the apartments where parents did hide a child or two, and the child started to cry. They were hidden in a wall, and it was camouflaged with a armoire.

But they pulled everything away, they grabbed the children by their legs, and drag them all the way downstairs with their heads dangling and the scalps cracking. When we came out later, their brains were all spilled on the steps. And when we looked out the window, we saw what they did when they found other children. They would go with the bayonets into the body of the child like you put a fork in meat and throw them into the trucks. And this is how they finished up, and it was in '43-- the aktion of the children and the old people.

Tania, in the summer of 1944, the Russians were advancing. And that's when the Germans decided to liquidate the Kovno ghetto. And that's when you were then taken yet again to a concentration camp this time. Tell us about that journey.

Right. They liquidated the Kovno ghetto, and they took us, and there was a big river called the Neman that was flowing into the Baltic. And you have seen before on the map Stutthof was on the shore, and the Neman was connected. And they put us in barges where ordinarily there was wood or coal, and they put us like sardines. And it was hot. The barges were open, and we were on the water sort of gliding.

And we didn't know where we were going. We were hot, dehydrated, and hungry. And there, I looked on the shore, and I saw families with children, with pets having picnics, playing ball. And I was thinking to myself, God, what have I done? What have we done? Why did these people take away our life and our freedom?

But there was nothing. I was just sitting there and crying while I was watching the others free and enjoying life. And then they brought us close to Stutthof to the shore, and they put us on trucks. And they brought us into the concentration camp.

Before we got-- until then, people were talking about concentration camps, but we couldn't visualize what it was. We came to this Stutthof. And as soon as we got off the trucks, there was a smell of burning flesh and burning bones. And then we saw a big, big building with a very tall chimney, and from the chimney were coming out-- it was coming out smoke and little particles. And then we realized that we are in a concentration camp with a crematorium.

We came there. They put us in a very large room. They separated men from women, and people knew already-- we knew that this is the end of us. And people were crying and hugging each other, and they knew that this is the end. And some people were very, very desperate. It's a horrible scene that I saw with my eyes, but I have to describe it.

Because it was a big place, in the back there was-- they dug a big ditch. And they put a wooden plank for people to go when they had to take care of their personal needs. And when we walked in there, it was very deep. And we saw people threw things in. Like we saw money and all kinds of things. And then there was one person that jumped into the excrement and committed suicide because we knew that this is going to be the end of us.

We sat there all night, and they gave us numbers. Did not tattoo numbers because they didn't have so many professionals to do it, but sewing on numbers. And in the morning, they said they are sending us to be disinfected, to be-- the entlausung. And we came into a room, and usually when I speak to children, I avoid this passage.

But again, I will never, ever forget this scene because I was a very young girl and very naive. And my mother never discussed anything with us of maturity. And here we were in a room, and there were German officers. And there was a gynecological chair with spurs, and they would make every woman get on the chair. And they were probing in her private parts to see-- to check if she has hidden any valuables there. And then they would pull her off, and then the next one.

And then they sent us into a room. I would say it was just a half the size of this auditorium. It was all made of aluminum-- the walls, the ceiling-- and they were showerheads hanging down. And they told us, you're going to get a

shower. And we were sitting there for an hour, just standing next to each other, actually. Not much room.

And then a few sprinkles of water came out, and they opened the gates. And they told us there are piles of clothes, piles of shoes. Grab something and line up.

So we went out. We grabbed something, and then, of course, we had to exchange. A tall woman got a little child's jacket or whatever. And then they piled us into barracks.

And we found out that the place that we were in was actually-- it was not a shower room. That was the actual gas chamber. But they had so many people come in at that time from the east and from the south that they didn't have time to gas us and to shove us into the crematorium. So they knew they could get to us, and they kept us in barracks.

Every morning, they had roll call. And my mother, may she rest in peace, she had a long life. She lived long enough to see grandchildren, great grandchildren, and great, great grandchildren. She passed away five years ago.

And she saw-- I would never be alive if it wasn't for my mother, the way-- what she did for me. And she would rake up a pile of dirt and put me on top when we had the roll call because she wanted my head should be level to everybody else's that they shouldn't notice that I'm a little girl. Until--

So at roll call, she would make this mound of dirt you were standing on?

Yeah, she put me on and I should stand on it. Right. And we were there a few weeks, and they had horrible, horrible things. Like if you have visited the exhibit when you come out from the elevator on the fourth floor, there is a mural, half-burned skeletons and half-burned logs. And you see the American officers who liberated the camp are standing next to it.

What they did, because they didn't have enough room and time in the crematorium, they would line up a row of people. Everybody had to carry a log. Told them to step forward, lie, down sprinkle with gasoline, another group until it was high, sprinkled with gasoline and set fire to it. As if you haven't been there yet, when you go out from the elevator, you'll see it.

And after two weeks, they told us to line up again that they're going to take several thousand people to dig-- because the Russians were advancing-- to dig trenches-- actually anti-tank trenches, cylindrical. And they would cover the top with camouflage. And they felt as soon as the Russian tanks will advance, they will fall into those trenches.

And we had to line up five in a row. And at the gate was the head of the concentration camp and all the kapos, and he was standing with a doberman, and a gun exposed, and a club. If anybody dared even to move, either they were shot, or the doberman would rip the person to pieces.

And here, we had to pass the gate. And this is something that I can't explain it. I spoke about it many times. I tried to rationalize or analyze, but it's beyond-- the only thing I can say is that I feel that that was a super miracle for me to be saved. As we were approaching the gate, and we were five in a row, my mother, my sister, myself, and two of my mother's friends.

And the head of the camp grabbed me, and he threw me on the pile where there were children and old people. And immediately, there were horses and buggies picking up the people and taking them to the crematorium. And this is how I cannot explain because you couldn't be smart enough, or rich enough, or whatever. Somehow, I feel an angel or God wanted me to live.

I picked myself up and I walked straight to the gate where the head of the concentration camp was. And I looked up at him. I'll never forget his face. He was tall, red hair, freckles, green, watery eyes. And I spoke German well.

And I looked up at him and I say to him in German that I am much older than I look, and I'm strong. And I have worked already, and there is my mother and my sister. And all of a sudden, I looked up at him. He looked down at me, and I saw

a flicker in his eyes.

He grabbed me here by my neck, pushed me through the gate yelling in German, [GERMAN]. OK, little girl, run to your mother. And you can just imagine when I came on the other side of the gate, my mother and my sister, as if I came from the other world. And then we were sent to this labor camps again to dig-- to dig the trenches.

And you continued doing that through the end of 1944. And in January of 1945, the Russians are closing in now. And that's when you were forced to go on a death march.

Right. We were there until January 18, and it was very, very cold. Every morning when we would get up, many of the people were frozen.

My sister and I take fistfuls of snow and rub the body, and that really restored the circulation. And January 18, 1945, they told us to get up and line up. We are going marching.

And we heard already THE Russian artillery in the background. And we started marching. This was the death march.

We couldn't march in the middle of the road because the Germans were retreating. So we marched on the sides. It was snowing. And at one point there was a blizzard, and then it would clear up. And on both sides of the road there were either dead bodies that expired that they died, they couldn't take it any longer, or they would kill them and the snow was red from this spilled blood.

And again, I was looking around me when it was a nice day. The sun was shining, and the frosty snow. And I would remember the days when my father would take me skiing. And again, I said, gosh, why, why, why?

And we were very, very, very hungry. I remember one day, I saw on the mountainside by the road I saw a farmhouse and smoke coming out of that little hut. And I wished-- I said, oh God, if I could only sit for a while in that hut because I visualized that is like heaven. Because we were hungry and cold, and whenever we found a garbage can, everybody was digging in to see if we could find something.

My mother once found a marrow bone. And first she gave it to my sister to suck on it. My sister was the weakest. And she was sucking on it for hours, and then my sister gave it to me. And then my mother held onto it. The next day we found something that it looked to me like bloody little lungs from a small animal, and we were sucking on it the whole day.

And then one day, as we were marching, and at night, they would put us either in schools, or in barracks, or in barns. And when they put us in a barn, that was the end. In the morning, we would get up and find frozen bodies.

One night, we survived the night. Happily, nobody died. Because they put us in a barn with cows, and we cuddled up to the cows. We kept warm, and we milked a little bit from the udder. And nobody died that night.

But days passed by, and one day I decided to sneak out of that camp to the farm-- to a farmhouse, the farmer. And I snuck out, and I went in to the farmer, and I told him that I was very hungry. And the farmer's wife cut off two big slices of bread, and she put something on it. And I put it in my coat.

I was wearing a little coat, but my mother has-- she found some kind of a robe, and she stuffed inside straw to keep us warm. And I put the bread in here.

And as I came out of the house, I saw two Germans maybe 200 feet away. And I saw a girl that had the same idea I did, and I saw them shot her down to death.

I-- immediately I fell down on the ground, and I stayed there for a while until I felt that it was safe enough. And I came back. And of course, my mother was very, very upset with me for daring to do something like this.

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And on the same march, it's interesting there how vicious. And the irony of this murderers that my older sister, she lives in Israel now, she became very hysterical. Until now, she suffers from depression. Just a while ago, she was a year in the hospital, and she had shock treatment every on and off from there.

So she stood against-- we were in the forest. She stood against a tree and she said, I'm not going anymore. Let them kill me. And she went into hysterics. And we begged her because whoever was left behind they immediately shot. And she wouldn't budge.

The last German, as he passed by, he came over to us. We were sure he's going to shoot us. And he says to my sister, what's the matter with you? She was very young and pretty.

And she said, I can't take it anymore. Just kill me. And he looked at her and he said, I'm not going to kill you when you want to die. I'll kill you whenever I'll feel like it. And he took out from his pocket an apple and a piece of cake, and I gave it to her-- he gave it to her. And with the butt of the gun, he smacked her over her back and he, said go. And she snapped out of her attack, and we made it.

We walked until we came to a place which was called-- the Russians called it a death camp. Because from Stutthof, they send messengers that they cannot, because the aim was for them to send us back to the concentration camp. They sent messages, no more. They don't have room for any more. They even took some of those came back, they put them on a boat, and they drown them in the Baltic.

So they diverted us into a death camp. And we came in there, and people were-- was so lies, and people were lying on the ground. There were pits outside, and every morning they would pull the skeletons. They didn't never cover the pit, and would throw the skeletons and then sprinkle chlorine and wait for the next day. And then I got sick with typhus, and I lost consciousness completely.

And the next time I woke up was-- I opened my eyes. I couldn't breathe, and my mother and my sister were dragging me. And then I lost consciousness again. It was one of the girls that worked for the Germans begged him because they were already evacuating, and they were going to-- they were going to explode the whole place, dynamite it.

The Germans were going to dynamite--

Dynamite-- were going not to leave a trace of what they did there. So there was a girl working for the Germans there in the kitchen-- a maid, and she begged them. She says, give them five minutes. Open the gates. Whoever is healthy, let them run.

So he listened to her. They opened the gates, and they announced, whoever could run, the gate is open. So out of 1,500 people, maybe 20 some survived. And I would not have survived if my mother and my sister were not dragging me out.

And then I woke up one day, and I saw I was in a bed-- white sheets, pillowcases. And I started-- I touched my head. My hair was shaved off, and I started to scream. I was petrified. And my mother and my sister came in. They said, oh, thank God. You passed the crisis of typhus, and we are liberated.

Tania, I wish that we could continue on to then what happens. I mean, you've still a long ways to go from that point. But we have time for just a few questions from our audience if we can before we close up the program.

Sure, yeah.

Let's turn to you to see if you have some questions, and please make it brief. I'll repeat it, then Tania will answer it. So do we have any questions from you? Yes, sir. Right in the middle there.

How do you account for the difference between how you and your sister emerged from this tragedy? She moved to Israel, and [INAUDIBLE] you an educator and [INAUDIBLE].

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The question is, Tania, how do you account for the difference in what has happened to you and your sister? Your sister in Israel who's been very depressed and all kinds of treatment, and here you've been an educator and the like.

Well, I guess the reason that she is there and I'm here is right after the war in '47, my sister got married. And her brother-- she had a brother-in-law in Israel that was there from the '30s. He knew that his brother survived, and he went to the authorities to-- actually, to the British authorities at that time, and he said that he found a daughter that survived the Holocaust. And they wanted to attach her to his passport.

So he took my sister with him to Israel. And at that time, I was in Bergen-Belsen hoping to go to Israel with my mother. And then I met my husband, and his family were set to go to the United States. So in 1950, October the 19th, we got on the General Langfitt, and we came to New York.

So my sister has lived there, and of course, she didn't have-- in all those years, she didn't have one good year. But I guess it's genetic, I guess. Well, I am not as in a condition as my sister, but I have terrible nightmares on and off. I used to get anxiety attacks.

Now I have learned as a marriage and family counselor, when I was studying for my master's, I went through self-analysis, psychoanalysis. And somehow, I have learned to deal with it. But even now, many times, I wake up in the middle of the night that I'm being chased, and I run for a Valium.

OK.

Yeah?

Young lady right there, and then we'll come to the gentleman over here.

How much did you eat, and when did you eat?

In what--

How much did you eat, and when did you eat when you were in the concentration camp? OK.

In the concentration camp, they would give us in the morning, we had a red bowl. And you would probably see it in the museum, enamel. And they would give us coffee, and it is, I would say, a piece of bread this size for the whole day. And they would give, let's say, a whole bread for a whole group of people. And with the straw, we would measure. And somebody every day would cut it so that nobody gets one crumb more or less, approximately this size.

And in the evening, in the same bowl, they gave us-- it was like a soup that there was peels from the kitchen, from the German kitchen. This is one thing they would throw in. And the other thing, there was like poison ivy. It was the plant, but it was very-- it would cause a rash while it was growing. But when it was cooked, it was not poisonous.

So they would cook the peels, and this, and add a little bit of flour. And this is what we ate at night.

Gentleman right there.

[INAUDIBLE]

The question is, during all that time, did you or others around you have any hope that somehow you would survive it and could be better?

Interesting. Some people did. Some people didn't. And what we have noticed, those that gave up hope were the first ones to die before they were killed or shipped to the gas chambers. I personally, because maybe I was a little girl, and I didn't understand the grasp, the immensity of the tragedy, but I also-- I believe in dreams.

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And one night, I had a dream that I was on a lake, it was dark, and it was stormy. And I was there with my mother and my sister, who were drowning. And all of a sudden, I saw a wooden beam on the lake. And I held on to it, and my mother, and my sister, and we paddled to the shore.

And I woke up in the morning. I says, mama, I know that we'll survive the war. My dream told me that we will. But there was no hope-- hope against hope that you couldn't be that optimistic that you would survive.

I'm sorry, folks. We're going to have to cut off the questions now. Our hour is almost up. I want first-- we're going to hear from Tania again in a moment, but I want to thank her very much, Tania, for spending this time with us, and for giving us just a glimpse into that horrific time that for us in the room is just unimaginable. And I wish that we had many more hours to spend with you.

Before I turn back to our first person to conclude today's program, I want to thank all of you for being here for sure. And I'd like to let that next Wednesday, March 10 at 1:00 PM, we will present another survivor as part of our First Person series. The first person next week will be Helena Peabody, who is from Poland.

Helena was not yet seven in September 1939 when the Nazis and Soviets overran Poland. After her father was shipped to Siberia by the Soviets, Helena and her family came under the control of the Germans. In order to save her two daughters, Helena's mother secured false identities as Catholics, which enabled the three of them to survive the war and the Holocaust.

Mrs. Peabody's appearance here is especially noteworthy because she was a hidden child, and the museum is presently featuring a remarkable exhibition-- life in shadows, hidden children in the Holocaust. We hope you see the exhibit today if you've not already done so, or come back and see it. The exhibit is here through May 12, I believe.

Next week would be an excellent time to see both the exhibit and hear Helena, as first person. It's our tradition that the first person has the last word. And with that, I'd like to turn it back to Tania to share with us any final thoughts she has, including maybe a little bit about why she does what she does in volunteering here at the museum.

Well, I do volunteer because the six million who perished cannot speak for themselves. And they are many survivors that they cannot tell their story. They cannot relate their experiences. And I feel as an educator, being able to speak in front of audiences, and I feel that it's my obligation to do so.

However, why do I do it? This is number one, for the memory of the martyrs, the victims-- my father and my family. At this point, some people say, what are you bothering us? It's so many years have passed by. Holocaust, Holocaust-- it's enough already.

No, it is not enough. Because even at this point, we see all the atrocities against people, against people, killing and trying to annihilate a different culture, a different religion. People different beliefs, and it's never enough for us to speak and to educate each other against evil. And specifically, I want to refer now how relevant it is.

I heard we are all familiar, we know the movie that is now very popular, Mel Gibson's movie. There was an interview with his father, and his father said-- and I read the excerpts-- he says, this-- he says, what do the Jewish people want? First of all, there was no Holocaust, so what are they bothering us?

He says, wherever I go, I hear people say, and I'm quote-- I'm not maybe in the same words, but that was the context. He says, I hear people say in Australia and New Zealand, I'm a child of a survivor. There are so many-- so there were survivors. So there was no Holocaust, and nobody was killed, and Hitler didn't kill anybody, and the Germans didn't kill anybody because those Jews ran away from Germany with lots of money to go over the world and to run the countries of the world.

Now, this was a week ago from the mouth of Mel Gibson's father. And this is why I feel the urgency at this point to emphasize and reemphasize that it's our obligation to contribute to uproot evil wherever it springs its ugly head. Thank you.

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Thank you, Tania.

[APPLAUSE]

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