

Good afternoon. My name is Teresa Pollin. I'm an associate curator at the collections division here in the museum. Welcome to the First Person. This year's programs have been generously funded by William Goldring and the Woldenberg Foundation.

First Person is a public program that takes place throughout the season at 1:00 PM here in the Rubenstein Auditorium. This one-hour program features the experience of a Holocaust survivor. Within that time, we'll have a question and answer period at the end. In honor of the survivor, we ask that you stay for the entire program.

Any passes for the permanent exhibition will be honored on or after the hour printed on the pass. So if you have a pass for 1:30, your pass is still good once the program is concluded. Photography is not permitted during the program, and we ask that you turn off the cell phones and pagers. Your response to the program is very important to us, so we ask that you fill out the response form you received when you came into the auditorium and return it to the attendant when you exit.

Our speaker this afternoon is Mrs. Lidia Siciarz. To give you an historical context for her experience, we have prepared a brief introduction.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

- 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.

Lidia Kleinman was born in Krakow, Poland in 1930. She grew up in the Polish town of Å Ä...cko, where her father was a doctor. In 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and under the terms of the German-Soviet pact, occupied the western part of the country. Lidia and her family fled from German-occupied Western Poland to Soviet-controlled Eastern Poland. There, Lidia's father found work at a local hospital.

After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, German forces occupied Eastern Poland. To save Lidia from deportation in 1942, she was placed in the care of a Catholic nun, Sister Jadwiga, the head nurse at the hospital where her father worked. With the aid of Sister Jadwiga and other Catholic clergy, Lidia was moved several times between 1943 and the end of the war in 1945.

One move put Lidia in an orphanage established in an abandoned building on the site of the destroyed Warsaw ghetto. Eventually, the orphanage moved to the nearby town of Kostowiec, where Lidia remained hidden until the end of the war. Lidia's father survived. Her mother was killed.

[END PLAYBACK]

Please join me in warmly welcoming Mrs. Lidia Kleinman Siciarz.

[APPLAUSE]

Lidia, maybe you'll describe first the conditions and the family that you lived in as a child in Å Ä...cko, Poland. Your father, a physician; your mother, lady of the house; and the family.

Well, I came from a well-off family, and the town actually was a small little town, shtetl. Was like 50% Jewish, and the rest, they were Polish peasants living around. My father was the only physician in this region, and he actually treated very poor people on the outskirts of this little town. And he has a lot of friends, and he-- mostly Polish friends, and also Jewish physicians. And we were extremely assimilated.

I actually knew that I am Jewish, but I will never attend synagogue. And we really felt very much Polish. My father was a Polish patriot, and he fought during the Polish independence in the Pilsudski army.

And he graduated from Polish university in Lvov. And he-- actually, I never felt that I'm different than the other children. I play with Polish friends, and we were very assimilated, they said.

Knowing your childhood from your pictures, lived in a lovely big home, and your mother entertained and had afternoon teas for many people.

Because we live very close to a larger town, it was Nowy Sacz and Krakow. So quite often, and place was really lovely place. It was in the mountains-- in the Carpathian Mountains. So quite often, for weekends we had, see, my first parents' friends coming from Krakow, and she entertained lavishly. She loved-- we had big parties, and we used to travel also to the nearby resorts. And so the life was really wonderful.

I was quite often left behind because my parents-- with maid because my parents used to travel a lot, but I felt very privileged in this town. I just was very happy.

And then came September 1939, and your father--

When my father was drafted to the army. And I remember very well because my grandparents, my father's parents, lived in nearby larger town was Nowy Sacz. And the family which lived in Vienna came, it was in 1938, actually. They came and they stayed with my father family.

But when German-- when war broke out, my father was drafted to the army. He was the officer in Polish army, so he was drafted to the medical corps. And my mother and my father family-- grandparents and aunts-- we decided to leave to eastern part of Poland because we thought that the German will never get there-- that we are going to return soon because a big, strong Polish army is going to protect us.

Where did you go?

We went to Pinsk. Pinsk, it was in Byelorussia, which belonged to Poland. And soon after, the Russian army invaded Pinsk and we found ourselves in Russia.

Why did you go to Pinsk?

My mother's family lived in Pinsk. My aunt and my grandmother lived in Pinsk. They had a large house, and they simply accommodated my father family.

But when the Russians came, my grandparents, my parents-- oh, my father-- soon, my father joined us because he escaped from the Russian

Prisoner.

Prisoner of wars. If not, he would be killed in Katyn. So he escaped, and he joined us in Pinsk. And then we were afraid that he might be caught, and we might be sent to Siberia. So we moved from Pinsk to Turka nad Stryjem, where my father's cousin was a dentist. And my father found a job in the local hospital and we simply settled in Turka nad Stryjem.

What kind of a place was that? Did you go to school there?

No. I didn't go-- I started to go to school, but soon after it was 1941. A German came, so we didn't-- Jews could not attend schools. School was closed. And we-- and they started oppression of Jews right away.

And for me, it was kind of shock because I didn't feel-- I knew I am Jewish, and I was very proud of it. But I didn't feel

different. I was always one of the privileged children in our little town.

And they-- immediately, we had to wear the armbands. And it was fine because my father was so proud that we fabricated a band at home. And he used to-- he taught me how to draw perfect Magen Davids-- two triangles.

And my father mostly work in hospital, and he had to stay there. And that was-- on that time, when German invaded Turka, it was the only source of food. Because it was tremendous hunger. We were not able-- we had rations, but the rations were-- food rations were so small that people were really dying out of hunger on the streets. I remember people swollen up from the hunger, begging for food.

Every day, it was my task to run to the hospital and bring from hospitals my father rations, mostly bread, and some soup, and whatever was given. And he-- and his friend, he was Polish doctor also, left his food so I could take it home to our family. It was my grandfather, and grandmother, and two aunts, and my mother, and myself. We live all together a little apartment.

But sooner or later, Germans started to deport Jews from Turka. It was not formally a ghetto, but it was Polish police-- Jewish police. And their task was to register enough Jews-- they used to say it is resettlement of Jews from Turka. And we all knew that they are sending everybody, the Belgians, to concentration camp of Belgians. And also they used to pack-- rounded Jews on the street and send them by car to the near forest and kill them just in the forest-- women, children, and see.

So one night, it was 1941, I remember, when it was January. It was before Ukrainian Christmas. And the Jewish policemen came to our house and informed my mother that next day we have to go to-- all of us, all Jews from Turka should go to railroad station for resettlement.

The same night, my mother in secrecy-- nobody knew because she didn't tell that to my grandmother, to anybody-- she walked me out and she sent me to the hospital with a little suitcase. Actually, it was cosmetic bag. And she said to go to your father, and give it to him, and tell him what is going on. What should I do?

So I ran to the hospital at night, and I knew my way how to get to the room where my father used to sleep with his friends, whoever had the stay overnight in the hospital. And he-- apparently, my father already knew about it. And they hide me in the closet-- in the big closet.

And then in the morning-- and early, early in the morning, the nun came in. It was head nun, and she took me from his room, from the closet, and she hid me in the men's bathroom in the stall. One stall was closed. They used to be like janitor closet, and they hide me in this bathroom.

And I was sitting with my leg up because you could see what's going on. And then, I heard the German cars. It was usually the used truck. We used to call them [POLISH], which means truck with the fabric on.

And they started-- I heard the shouting and dogs. And they were taking Jewish patients on the truck. And it was a little louver that I could see outside the hospital from, and they were taking everybody. And if somebody was really sick, they used to shoot him on spot.

And then I saw my father-- my father and another doctor with a white coat. They were loading them to the truck. So I decided, I don't want to stay by myself. So I opened the door and I ran out, but on the way, suddenly, I saw Sister Jadwiga coming in. She caught me, and she hide me in one of the rooms. And she said, don't worry. Your father is not going to be taken because we need doctors.

Apparently, I saw some of the Polish doctor running, and they said, well, we need doctors because we have typhoid fever on the nearby villages. And we need doctors with-- we have to send those Jews to villages. But later on, I was hidden in the hospital. I haven't seen my father from this day on. I just-- she was hiding me in the attic, and in the closet, and in other places. And I don't know how long. I just don't.

But one day she came in and she took me to the town. And she hide me in her apartment. And it was probably two months, and then she bought a ticket which send me to Lvov.

Let's see. It was another nun which came in. She was dressed as a nun, and they gave me-- I remember they put my-- German requested that all the Jews should cut their hair, women three centimeters and men shave their head. But my mother never cut my hair, so I had a long braids. So she just put my braids the way Ukrainian girls used to wear, you know. And see, they even put powder on my face so I don't see so Jewish.

And she left-- I really knew the prayers because I was raised in the Catholic environment when I was-- and so I went by train with her to-- with rosary in my hands-- to Lvov. And in Lvov, they placed me in the orphanage. I have stayed there maybe two months, but apparently the nuns, the head nun was afraid to keep Jews in Lvov.

So the same nun came in, and she took me to the little-- to the orphanage in the Ukrainian village near Turka. Name was [NON-ENGLISH]. And it was mostly Ukrainian village. The only Polish place was the orphanage and monastery.

And I stayed in this orphanage about several months. But I was actually-- when I came to orphanage, I noticed the girl which I thought she is Jewish. Nobody knew who I am except head nun and Sister Sophia, which was our teacher, actually.

But soon later, I noticed some girls coming to the orphanage which was brought from Lvov. And I don't know how many, but some of them were definitely Jewish. We could recognize ourselves right away, you know? It was kind of behavior that you see.

First we were very scared, and you just-- we are not so happy like other children. We kept for ourself, and we never were friendly with-- I never was friendly with another Jewish girl, which I suspected because I really didn't know.

On the winter of 1943, the Ukrainian group invaded orphanage because it was certainly hate between Ukrainians and Poles. And they decided they started to kill Polish people living in the monastery working for Germans, and also nuns. And they set buildings on fire.

So Gestapo came because they saw the fire and they save us. They gave everybody-- it was a long line, and they ask everybody names. So the first time I have real papers, really. And they took us to Lvov, and later out to Warsaw.

Quite ironic, wasn't it?

It was very ironic, yes. And in Warsaw, the first I was placed in MÄ™dzylesie, it was the little orphanage near Warsaw. And later on, our nun opened the orphanage in the old house which used to be a ghetto. And he makes sure that she-- and she took me from this orphanage that I stay. I was again living in Warsaw in the house which we set, and I remember we had to clean.

It was a building that we got like two floors. And previously, it was occupied by Jews. And furnitures were gone, but it was plenty of papers and photographs on the floor. And I remember cleaning that, and I couldn't-- I look at those photographs, and I just felt like it was my family. I knew these people are not existing anymore.

And I stayed in this orphanage till Warsaw uprising. Actually, I was pretty privileged because I suffered as much as other Polish children. We were hungry. We were dirty. We had lice, and we have-- but it was just a group of very poor kids. And we had our fun, and we had our trouble.

And the funny thing that this little suitcase or cosmetic bag which my mother gave me stayed with me because my father didn't have chance to take it away. And I was carrying that stuff with me all the time. Afterward when my father opened it, because I didn't have a key, so he pry open these, he found out my birth certificate, his birth certificate, his diploma, photographs, all the papers. It was enough somebody will open that it was like a time bomb. And I had it with me.

And that was the Warsaw uprising. And again--

It was August 1944.

1944. And the German chased everybody away from the building, and they set building on fire. And they took us through the Warsaw street to the railroad station. And I remember like today that on both sides, buildings were burning. And we were taken with Polish people, of course, and I was probably I thought I'm only Jew that survive the war.

And we were going to the railroad station, and it was terrible, terrible feeling. Because the air was thick of the smoke, and there were some people removing bodies from the-- burned bodies from the building. I don't know who these people were, but they were workers, and they were-- you could see from time to time a group of people removing half the burned bodies from the ashes from those burning buildings and placing them like wood on a platform.

Anyway, when we reached the station, we were taken to the camp, which was set in Pruszkow. It was near the Warsaw. That was camp. And somehow, the children and nuns were let go, and we walk to the [NON-ENGLISH] forest, which usually during the night because all the escapee from Warsaw were taken by Germans patrol. So we walk at night, and we were hiding during the day.

And when we reach this [NON-ENGLISH] forest, it was a big school which was also run by nuns. And we stay in this school till the liberation. It was in 1944-- actually, end of 1944. Russian army went-- liberated us, and we went back to Warsaw.

I would like to go back a little bit, if it's all right with you.

Yeah.

What happened with your father? Did you see your father after the three days that you spent in the stall in the hospital?

No. No.

Did he ever come and visit you in the orphanage?

No. Oh, I'm sorry. Once when I was in [NON-ENGLISH], one night the nun walked me out and she led me to the guest room. Apparently, my father was-- on that time was in nearby village, and he was treating-- immunizing people for typhoid fever. And he came to see me. I was very sick at that time because I had-- my entire body was covered by--

Scabies.

--scabies and wounds, and it was-- I had tremendous lack of vitamins. And I was very thin. And the nun decided when she came in, I don't know if they contacted him or he came by himself, but they wanted him to see me. Because they figured out that I probably have syphilis because a would like that--