

--the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson, and I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. This is our fifth season of First Person. Our First Person today is Mrs. Elizabeth Strassburger, whom we shall meet shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us firsthand their own experiences associated with the Holocaust and World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here in the museum. Each Wednesday through August 25 we will feature a new "first person." The museum's website features those who will be appearing on First Person in the weeks ahead, and the website address is [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)-- that's [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org).

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Elizabeth Strassburger 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 Liz some questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have a couple of requests of you. First, if possible, please stay in your seats throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions while Liz speaks. And second, if you have a question during the question and answer period-- we sure hope that you will-- please try to make it as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so that all in the room, including Liz, hear it before she responds to it.

I'd also like to let all of those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition today know they're good for the balance of the afternoon. So you don't need to worry about missing the exhibit if you stay here through the entire hour.

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.

Having Liz Strassburger with us today is especially noteworthy because, as you will hear, she was hidden under a false identity during the Holocaust, 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 make a point to come back and see it.

What you're about to hear from Liz Strassburger is one individual's account of the Holocaust. As she will tell us, she and her mother were able to survive the Holocaust in Poland by hiding with a family under false identities as Christians until they were liberated by the Russians in 1945.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Liz's introduction. And our first picture is a photo of Liz as a young child with a toy.

We next have a map of Europe with an arrow that points to Poland. Liz grew up in Iwonicz-Zdrój, a resort town in southwestern Poland noted for its healing waters.

When German troops invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Liz's father was drafted into the Polish army. This photo is of an identity card issued to Liz's father, Dr. Edmund Lusthaus, by the Polish army. 17 days later, the Soviet army attacked from the east, following the terms of the Nazi-Soviet pact, and Dr. Lusthaus was captured. He was in Siberia when our next photo was taken.

In 1941, Liz and her mother went to the Tarnów Ghetto. And here we have a map of Poland with our arrow pointing to Tarnów. Liz's mother, Helena Lusthaus, holds Liz in this next photo, aged three, just before they were forced into the Tarnów Ghetto. In our next photo, Liz plays with a ball while in the Tarnów Ghetto.

Realizing the danger, Liz's mother purchased Aryan papers for Liz and herself, and escaped to Milanówek, a town near Warsaw. There they lived with a Polish family. Liz was given the name Barbara Stachura and raised as a Catholic. This report card issued to Barbara Stachura states that she performed very well.

After the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto in April 1943, German authorities intensified their efforts to find Jews in the surrounding area who were in hiding. Fearing they would be discovered, Liz's mother sometimes kept Liz from school or hid her in the basement.

In January 1945, Soviet troops occupied Milanówek. In May, Liz's mother bribed a Russian soldier to smuggle them in shipping crates across the border to Czechoslovakia. From there, Liz and her mother went to Austria and then to Germany. And the arrows trace their route.

After the war, Liz moved to England, and then to the United States in 1951 at age 13. She would later enjoy a successful career as a psychiatric social worker working with emotionally disturbed children in Montgomery County, Maryland. Today, Liz serves as a volunteer at the museum, translating important historical documents that are written in Polish.

Liz and her husband live here in the Washington area. They have two children-- a daughter who is a physician and a son who is an artist. They also have two grandchildren-- Jack, who is five and a half, and Ava who is age three. I'm pleased to say that Liz is accompanied today by a dear friend, Myra [? Soccur. ?] And Myra, if you might just wave your hands so people know you're down here in the front row next to Liz. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Liz Strassburger.

[APPLAUSE]

OK.

Thank you, Liz, for your willingness to serve as our First Person, and to be with us today. You were born in a small town in Poland and living with your parents when the Germans invaded Poland in 1939. You were a very young child at that time, about 15 and a half months, 15 months old. Do you mind starting today with telling us what you know of your family life and your community in those days before Germany invaded Poland?

Sure. As Bill said, we lived in a little town called Iwonicz-Zdrój. And it was a spa where people came to take the waters, and get shots, and become young again. My mother and father were married in 1936, and I arrived in 1938. I was very welcomed. I had two sets of grandparents, an aunt, lots and lots of cousins, and everything was good. My parents loved each other, and they were happy, and they were hoping to have more children.

I was born, actually, in Kraków, which is a big city. And I think, from what my mother told me, is she had wanted a boy. And so she wanted to make sure that there was someone who could do a bris. And I turned out to be a girl, which was good, because she could save me a lot better than if I had been a boy, for obvious reasons.

In 1939, the war broke out.

Before you go to the war, Liz, tell us a little bit about your parents. They were both professional people, weren't they?

My father was a physician. My mother was a pharmacist. My mother stopped working when she got married. And as I said, she had a lot-- we had a lot of family. And they lived there for three years. And then the war broke out.

In fact, you had described to me that your life, from what you know, really was idyllic.

Yes.

An idyllic life at that time.

Yes. We had servants-- in those days you said "servants" and not anything else-- who took care of things. And my mother was a lady, and she didn't do anything. And my father was very happy to work. He loved-- he loved being a physician.

And then the war broke out. And the Germans came from the west and the Russians came from the east, and pancake. Poland was a pancake, pretty much.

But before my father had gone into the army, before he was taken, my-- he went to visit his own parents, who lived near-- in Łódź. Excuse me, no. In Lvov. And he went to say goodbye to them before he went into the army.

And then, when he tried to get back to us, he was taken to Siberia. And in 1939, my mother, at the age of 28, found herself a widow with a child, and living in a very, very tiny town, where someone would sell her for money. There were very, very few Jews in that little town. So she did whatever a young woman would do who didn't have a husband. She went to her own mother.

Liz, just so we're all clear, when your father was taken and shipped to Siberia. That was after the invasion--

That's correct.

--by both the Russians and the Germans.

That's correct.

And so the town he went to was under Russian control.

Right.

So they sent him off to Siberia.

Exactly.

Do you know why he was sent to Siberia?

If he was going from a Russian sector to a German sector, then he was anti-Russian. It was just that basic. And a lot of Polish soldiers were sent, were sent to Siberia.

My mother, as I said, we went to Tarnów, and we lived with my grandmother. And my grandmother was very wealthy.

And what I remember were the very, very heavy carpets that she had, and all the beautiful furniture, and all the beautiful pictures on the wall, and lots of good food, and lots of fun.

And then, somehow-- I was very, very young-- all the carpets disappeared. All the pictures disappeared. Everything was gone. And my mother, my grandmother, and my grandmother's sister, and several other relatives and I, were all living in one room. And there were bare floors. And I couldn't quite comprehend that.

And I didn't, until I came to work here. And then, when I donated my pictures, my supervisor said, that's the ghetto. And I didn't know that I had been in the ghetto until I came to work here. Very strange.

Liz, do if your mom knew what had happened to your father, and if she was able to have any communication with him whatsoever?

There was no communication.

No communication.

But I know that we had postcards that were sent to where his parents were, and they came back.

Did she know he was alive, even?

No.

No. Didn't even know that.

No. She assumed he was dead.

And then, so, when you moved in with your grandmother, and as you described, initially there were carpets and nice furnishing, and then they were gone, and you were living in the ghetto. Were you ever able to learn from your mother how she was able to manage in that period before she went into the ghetto, how she could feed herself and feed you?

Well, before she went into the ghetto, there was a lot of money.

Still was-- still had some, yeah.

Oh, yes. Yes. And then, when the Germans decided that they wanted to exterminate the Jews, they sent us to the ghetto. And from the ghetto, people went to Belzec, which was one of the killing camps.

I don't quite know how long we were in the ghetto. But I know that in 1942 there was a second Aktion, which was a law where the Germans said, all right, we need 15,000 Jews. And they would take so many Jews, and put them in the cattle carts, and take them to Belzec for execution.

And I remember, my mother was working outside of the camp. The able-bodied worked outside. And she was working in a tailor shop. And my grandmother took care of me.

And I remember my grandmother and I were walking. And suddenly, two Germans started coming towards us. And I was very little, and they were huge. They looked so huge.

And there was a little hut, or a gazebo. I don't quite know. And both my mother and my grandmother had said, if I was ever scared, I was to go into this thing, and go under one of the benches.

So when these men started coming, my grandmother said, go hide. And I ran under there. And I looked, and they took her away. And that was the last time I saw my grandmother.

And I was just so scared. I just stayed there. And my mother told me that she was so scared because she thought maybe I had gone with my grandmother too to the killing camp. But she remembered, and she went, and there I was there. And I was crying and I was very upset.

But your grandmother told you to go hide--

Yes, yes.

--before that happened.

Yes.

Liz, I'm going to go back just a little bit. You mentioned your mother worked in a tailor shop.

Yes.

What was she-- what was she doing in the tailor shop?

She was working with us. They were making coats--

For the German-- for the German army.

For the Germans, yes.

So forced labor--

Forced labor, yes.

--for the German army.

Yes, yes.

And while you were in the ghetto, before your grandmother went and you fled, I recall that your grandfather played a role.

My grandmother and my grandfather had been divorced, which was very unusual. And my grandfather had remarried and gone to live in the Netherlands. And he was sending gift packages to my mother.

Because in the ghetto there was no food. You couldn't-- it's not as if there were stores or anything. You ate what you could, and if you had any money or anything of value, you traded it with someone who had food. Or sometimes Christians would come in and would bring food, and you paid them with whatever you had.

And this was Tarnów, where my mother had been raised. So she knew a lot of people. And she realized that once they took my grandmother, that I would be probably in the next export, because I was of no use. I was too small to work, and there was no use for children.

They had to be fed.

Right. Right.

Liz, you you just told us about an unimaginable event, having your grandmother taken from you before your very eyes during that Aktion. But of course, that was when your mother decided it was time to take drastic action and go into hiding. Tell us about that.

Yeah, my mother knew a lot of people in Tarnów, and so she bought us Aryan papers. At that point, I was six. Let's see, '43. I was five. I was born in '38. I was five. And the child that-- whose card I had was a little-- was a year older. But it didn't really make a difference.

And we went to a totally different part of Poland because there was a woman who was there in hiding, and she-- her husband and my father had been friends. And she found us the Bandyrowa family. And it consisted of a mother, father, and two daughters. And one of the girls was nine years older than I. So she was 14. And her name was Wisia.

And the father of the family was in a German prison. So it was the mother, and her two daughters, and my mother and I, and several other people.

The house was what I thought was very, very big. But 50 years later, when I went back to Poland with my husband, and we looked, and I said, oh, my gosh, it looks so small. And he said, yes, but this is the address. And I said, doesn't-- it looks so small. I just-- excuse me, Wayne.

I as a child, I thought it was so much bigger. But that was the house.

Liz, as you mentioned your mother was able to obtain these papers.

Yes.

Do you have any idea how she was able to do that, what it took for her to be able to obtain false identities and the paperwork to go with it?

You bought them. You bought them on the black market. But somebody had to be willing to let their papers be used to copy or whatever. You know, I don't know.

Recognizing that you were so young, clearly your mother had to say to you, you're no longer your own person. You're somebody different now, so you've got to have that drummed into you that you can make no mistakes. Do you remember anything about that?

Well, it was more like, we're going to a different part of Poland, so we have to have different names. And if you're three or four, and your mother says this is what you do, you do. And your name is going to be Barbara-- Basia, which is the diminutive. And we're going to live with a nice family. And this lady is going to be your aunt. OK, fine.

And one of the questions that I always get, people say, how could you just follow what your mother said? Because there was a war, and because, when your mother told you to do something, you did it. My children never did it, but that's another story.

[LAUGHTER]

Of course, now then, you are four or five years old. You're in hiding under false identities, living as a member of a family that you don't know-- and, more importantly, living in a religion that you are not familiar with, a different culture.

I was fortunate because my parents weren't really practicing Jews initially. And certainly you couldn't practice in the ghetto. And my mother said, you'll go to church. I went to church.

In those days, mass was in Latin. And I still remember. And I went to school. And I went to school with the Sisters of Saint Ursula-- the great Ursulines. And they have the gray habits and little skull caps.

And when sister said, jump, you'd say is that high enough? And that's what you did. And you behaved because they had big sticks, and they would hit you.

What else do you remember from that time?

I remember how nice Wisia was. She was 14. She was almost a young lady. And she sort of took care of me.

And I remember playing in the yard with a lot of kids, and rolling around in the mud. I remember my mother putting a thing around my neck, and carbolic acid around when the Germans came, so that I looked sick. And they would say, krank? And she would say, yes.

And then they'd say, wo ist Ehemann, which means, where is your husband? And she would say, in Siberia. And they would say, oh, OK. Fine.

So the Germans would actually come to the home--

They would come to the home--

They would come to the house, and they were checking papers, and we had papers.

For those in the audience who might not know, tell us about carbolic acid.

Carbolic acid is something that they used in Polish hospital to disinfect things. I'm sure they don't use

anything like that anymore. But I had a kind of a hospital smell. And my mother, being a pharmacist, knew about these things.

So a clear sign you would be sick.

Yes, I was "sick."

I think you told me--

And then sometimes we hid-- I hid in the-- you called it a basement. You were generous. It was really a place where they stored potatoes, and wood and stuff, like an outside, like a cellar. And we would go there.

And sometimes I was sedated so I wouldn't move or cry. And sometimes I was OK.

And I went to church every Sunday, and my mother had knee trouble every Sunday. And I never-- I never connected that until I was a grown up. Why did she get sick on Sunday? Well, she couldn't walk.

You mentioned to me too that, besides carbolic acid, that your mother sometimes put mud on your face?

No, that was Wisia.

Wisia would do that.

Wisia would put stuff on my head and on my face because I was the only one of the children that was dark, as opposed blue-eyed blond. And when the Germans came, they saw 10 dirty kids. They all looked alike.

A bunch of dirty kids and didn't pay much more attention.

And it wasn't until I went and I found Wisia again in Poland after many, many years that she told me she knew I was Jewish. I did not.

By then, you'd come to believe that you were Catholic?

Well, there was never a question.

Never a question. OK. I think you mentioned that Wisia-- there was another sibling.

There was an older sister, Hanka. And she was kind of snooty. She was probably maybe 16, so she was above this. And she knew too. So it was the mother and the two daughters that knew I was Jewish, and nobody else-- not the priest, not the nuns, no one.

They didn't know anything about this.

No, no.

One of the really remarkable things that you told me about the house itself, though, it was more significant than just their home.

Yeah.

Tell us about that.

This was a house that was used by the Polish underground. And they had little eagles. And the eagle is the bird of Poland. And they flashed. If they were red, nobody was to come. If they were white, it was OK. And you could move them back and forth.

In the window--

In the windows, right.

So one side of the eagle was red and one side was white.

Right, they were little things near the clasps. And you could just turn it.

So just turn it and it would signify if it was safe--

Right, it was not safe to come.

Interesting.

And we had a wardrobe. I don't know how many of you have seen this big wardrobe in the exhibit, in the "Hidden Children" exhibit. We had a big wardrobe like that. And there was a false door behind it. And people hid there, brought there by the underground. And they would stay one day, two days, whatever. Everybody shared food. Everybody shared whatever they needed to.

And there was a war. So there were shots all the time.

We were near Warsaw. I remember when the ghetto burned, because it was so loud and so awful. But I was a little kid, and I was Christian, and Jews were bad. And what they taught you in school was the Jews killed Jesus Christ, and you should hate Jews. And the Germans were doing a really good thing to get rid of them.

Did you realize that it was a safe house? Did you know what this was about?

No, no, absolutely not.

Just people coming and going.

There was a war. And it was a, as I said, a big house. And we had one room. And other people were there. And people came and people went.

And you didn't question. There was a war. People were dying. You were happy you had a place to go to.

You did have an incident where you actually were the victims of a crime, weren't you?

Yes. Yes. We went to visit some friends. And some men broke in. And they were robbing.

At gunpoint, right?

Yeah, they were robbing. And everybody had to lie down on the floor with their face down. And I had to go to the bathroom. And my mother kept saying, don't move. Don't move. And I was toilet trained. I wasn't going to go on the bathroom. So I said to them, could I have-- could I go to the bathroom?

And they had big dogs with them. And it's amazing that I have dogs. My friend Myra and I walk in the park together, and we have dogs, and it's amazing that I was able to-- I was very scared of the dogs.

And then we left, and they said, now, don't tell anybody that this happened. But we went to the police station. And we gave the wrong address of where we lived because we didn't want to be connected. But we reported the crime.

At some point, Liz, you also spent some time living in a convent, at least for a period of time.

That was later.

Tell us a little bit about that.



Well, I want to tell you more about the house.

Please.

After the Germans left, the Russians came to liberate us. And when they liberated us, they decided this was a wonderful place to make their headquarters. So they kicked some of the people out. But we stayed.

And then anybody that came to the house had to stay. You weren't allowed in and out. So I couldn't go to school. And everybody was there.

And we had a woman that used to deliver milk in really big cans. And she brought the milk. And then they wouldn't let her go.

And I remember that she got sheets, and she tied them together, and she went out the bathroom window, just to go.

And then my mother-- and then they-- I guess things calmed down. And my mother realized that really, there was no point. To us staying so she wanted to go to the Kraków area, to the southern Poland, to check to see if anybody had survived.

And after the war, there was a book published of Jews that had survived. And we were in the book and my father wasn't, so we assumed that he was dead. And my mother looked for-- to see if there was anybody. And there was no one.

Before we go on from there, Liz, that when the Russians came in and liberated the area, and the Germans had fled, of course, was that a time-- did you feel safer then? And was that a time when your mother could then basically shed the false identity and go back?

No, we still stayed with it. But then-- thank you for reminding me. Then I remember my mother said, now the Russians are here, and we can't tell him that Daddy is-- your Daddy is in Siberia. We have to say he was in a concentration camp. And so I said, OK.

So reverse the story--

Yeah, so when they came, and where is your husband? My husband was taken to a concentration camp. And that was OK.

I had a very, very strong mother, extremely strong, very tough. By then, she was only in her early 30s. And she'd lost her husband. And she saved me. I mean, she took care of me.

And it certainly would have been much easier for her without me.

Right. What was life like under the Russians during that period?

Well, we had more food. But you still had restrictions.

And, as you said, you're still--

You're still--

--the Stachura family.

Yes, we're still the Stachura family. And there were restrictions. Eventually they allowed me to go to school. And the big girls went to school.

And Mr. Banderow came back, because he was liberated from his German prison. And I don't remember him

very much at all, because I saw him for such a short period of time. But he was the one that took my mother to the Kraków area to look for family. And there was, of course, there was nobody.

And at that point, my mother made a decision that she wasn't going to stay in Poland, that she would go to wherever she could be really free. And so she bribed a Russian guard to take us out in crates of china. And there was straw. And then I was on the straw. And then the-- a layer of wood, and then more straw. And that's how we got across the border from Poland to Czechoslovakia.

Literally hidden in crates.

Hidden in-- yeah, and I was sedated, because I don't remember. My mother told me that she was afraid I would cry. And they took us across the border into Czechoslovakia.

In these boxes, essentially.

Yes, yes. Crates. They were round barrels.

And then we went. We were let out in Czechoslovakia. And we lived on raw potatoes for a few days. But we were free.

But before we did all this, I have to tell you, my mother said, we're going to be leaving, and we're going to go to a certain part of Poland where they're going to help us get away. But I have to tell you that you're not really Barbara Stachura. You're really Elzbieta Lusthaus, and you're Jewish.

And I said, oh, my gosh, how can that be? Those are awful people. How can I be Jewish?

So where does a nice little Catholic girl go? She goes to her priest, right? So I went in, and I said to the priest, Father, I have something terrible to tell you. And he said, my child, there is nothing so bad that God doesn't forgive.

And I said, I'm Jewish. Will I go to heaven? And he said, no. Get out of here. And that was my first-- my first horrible experience as a Jew. Here I am.

I mean, I didn't want to be a Jew. I was happy being a Catholic. I hadn't done anything bad, and I wasn't going to go to heaven. Maybe being a Jew was not such a good thing.

But we left anyway. And on the way, while my mother was making the arrangements, I stayed in the convent for seven days.

While she was organizing the trip [CROSS TALK].

With the Sisters of the Presentation, which is a specific order in Poland. There is no such order here. And they had square wimples and long--

And then she said to me, now--

Do you remember that stay?

That I remember. That I remember very, very-- yeah.

Was it an OK experience?

Yes, because then she told me, now we're going to forget that I told you you were Jewish. You're Catholic again. OK. OK. You go with the flow.

So I was Catholic again, and we prayed, and we did everything. And that was that. And then we were in Czechoslovakia.

And then we walked into Austria. And the Rothschild Hospital was one of the primary places where Jews went. And the first thing that they did was they sprayed us with DDT just in case we had, lice.

But what was interesting was we were in one room. All the women with children were in one room. And they were-- whoops-- I'm so sorry. They were all Jewish. Everybody was Jewish. They spoke different languages, but they all could talk about experiences, and the kids could play, and we had three meals a day. We had clean clothes. It was heaven.

And these were people--

It was wonderful.

--who'd come from all over Europe.

They had come from all over, right. And we stayed there about, I think, six months maybe, or maybe six-- maybe six weeks. It was a very short stay.

And then we went to another camp, another-- a DP place. And we were there for a while.

DP being Displaced Persons--

A displaced persons camp, yes. And that was in Germany. And then we went to a third one. And it was a place where children who were sick, or children who were very-- in very bad shape were allowed to-- it was sort of a camp where you got better.

And we were going to go to Israel, because my father was dead. And my mother thought if we went to Israel, at least maybe she would find somebody who was family. And we were waiting for a ship to take us. And at that time, it was very difficult to get a ship to get Jews to go to Israel, because the British didn't want them going and so on.

And a medical commission came through the camp. And my mother recognized one of the men. And he had been a friend of my father's.

In your hometown? Knew him from there?

I don't think so. I think maybe from medical school or whatever. And I know that when I talk, and when all my fellow survivors talk, we always say, there's a miracle. And he said, no, your husband is alive, and he's in Italy. And what happened--

And that was the first inclination--

That was the first inclination that he was alive.

Wow.

And it turned out that, because he was a physician, he got better treatment. He lost a few toes from--

Frostbite.

--frostbite, yeah. But mostly it was OK. And you saw the picture with the outfit.

And then General Anders, who was a Polish general, decided that he wanted to form a brigade of Polish soldiers to fight against Rommel in North Africa. And then eventually, the army went to Italy and fought in Monte Cassino.

And he really didn't want to take Jews, because he was somewhat antisemitic, but the Jews were the

doctors, and the dentists, and so on. So he really needed to take them.

As part of his army.

As part of his army. And so they went to North Africa and they fought there. And then they went to Italy and fought there. And then they were in Italy.

And the next day-- and so this friend of my father's sent a telegram to Italy, and my father sent an ambulance. And one of the questions I get is, why did he send an ambulance? Because if you're a physician, that's what you have. You don't have Humvees and you don't have tanks. You have ambulances.

So we went. And--

Where was the displaced persons camp that you were in at that time?

It was in Ansbach, which is near Munich-- München.

So he sent the ambulance from--

From Italy to Germany.

--Italy to Germany to get you.

Yes, yes. And there he was. And my mother-- my mother said-- I didn't know all this, but later my mother told me. And she says, we're going to go meet your father. And I said, I thought he was dead. And she said, well, he's alive, and we're going to see him. And there he was.

And he was such a smart man that he was there, and there was a doll, probably this size, also there. And unfortunately, he died very, very early. So I didn't really have a chance to really have a good time with him.

Soon after the war he died?

Yeah.

Do you know, Liz, first, of course, he was a prisoner of the Russians in Siberia.

Right.

And so when Germany turned on the Russians, at that point, is that when your father was liberated by the Russians?

I think it was 1941 that he-- Anders decided to form--

And Anders forms his army in Russia.

Yes, exactly.

And that's how your father was able to become part of it.

Yes. Yeah.

The extraordinary upheaval that you've described already, to learn in a relatively short period that you're not who you thought you were, the experience you had with the priest, having to be shipped out in crates because things were not safe for you, and then to find that your father is alive-- immense amount of change and upheaval in your life. Do you recall-- and it's hard to ask you that, because you were so young-- but do you recall what it was what it felt like to go through all of that?

Well, there was a war, so bad things happened. So anything that was not good, it was due to the war. I assumed that my father was dead, so that was a positive kind of a thing when we found him.

And once we started being in the camps, in the DP camps, it was much, much better, because I could make friends, and people-- the kids played and did things, sang songs and whatnot. I started having a normal life, which was kind of nice.

So here he dispatches an ambulance. It picks you up and takes you and your mother back to Italy. What happens when you get to Italy?

We get to Italy, and we start traveling all over Italy. And we-- because at that point, the army was just sitting there until they were moved to wherever they were going to be moved.

And we went to all the places, and we looked at beautiful art. And we ate absolutely wonderful food. And there was food all over the place. And it was terrific.

Was your father still in the army at that time?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yeah, after Italy, the army went to England. And it was two years before they were demobilized. And then they could make their own decisions.

So you went with him when he went to England.

Oh, yes we went to Italy. I mean--

Still serving in the army in England.

Yes, and we went to England when he was still in the army. And I started school. And lo and behold, I went to Catholic school--

In England?

--because-- yes. Because all my friends went to Catholic school. So it was home. It was fine.

And then, in England, it's a different kind of a situation. When you're about 10-- no, maybe-- yeah, when you're about 10, you sit for an exam. And if you do well, you go into a grammar school where you wear a uniform, and a hat, and a tie, and whatnot. And I went to one of those places.

And there they thought I was Catholic. So I remember the headmistress said to my father, you can have her come out when we pray, because it's Church of England in England. And my father said, no, no. It's all right. I want her exposed to all religions. It's OK. She can pray with you. So I did that.

And that was late 1946, I think, when you went to England.

Right.

And you spent, what, five years--

Five years in England. And my father, after the army was demobilized in '48, he got a job as a physician in a school district in Durham. We had lived in Northumberland, which is the county that's the farthest north in England.

So, very rural.

Not really.

Not really? OK.

Not really. It was OK.

What was life like for you in England in general?

It was wonderful.

It was wonderful?

It was wonderful. It was. People were friendly. We had a little-- I don't want to say house, because it wasn't a house. It was really a barrack for the three of us. I had my own room for the first time in my life-- that I remember. I mean, obviously, I had it when I was a very small child.

But it was-- I had a house. I had friends. I went to school. We had a cat-- my first animal. And you know, it was idyllic. It was wonderful.

And I didn't want to leave. And then my parents said--

More change.

My mother-- yeah, my mother found my grandmother's sister. And my grandmother's sister and her husband were living in Newark, New Jersey. And so it was decided that we would go to Newark, New Jersey. So we did. But we went on the Queen Mary, because Harry Truman, god bless him, made a special law that any Polish army person who had fought with the Allies against the Germans could come in, because they had quotas for Poles.

So we came to Newark, New Jersey. And there we were in one room again, living with my great aunt. And then my father had to go back to school to study medicine. He had to do an internship.

In order to get licensed in this country.

Right. I was 13. So I went into eighth grade. But in the meantime, I'd had algebra and geometry and all these other things. And I was very bored in school.

And why was that? Because you were just so--

Because I was repeating things that I had learned in England.

You had been educated in England at earlier ages.

And my father said, instead of-- why don't you go to summer school? And I said, because only dummies go to summer school. And he said, but you could take a course for six weeks, and it'll be six months in reality, which made a lot of sense.

And so that's what I did. And so I graduated in three and a half years. And then I went to college. And I was bored there, bored there too. So I went to summer school. And I graduated in three and a half years. And then my father died.

So that was a really very, very big loss for us because he was in a hospital, working in a hospital in Maryland, in a psychiatric hospital. And we had a lovely house on the grounds. And my mother was very happy. She had friends. And he died, and we had to leave the house within six months. And so that's what we did.

Oh, because it was on the grounds of the hospital.

It was on the grounds and it came with his job. So she moved back to New Jersey. And by then, I had met my husband to be, and we were getting married. So I stayed in Maryland. And I stayed in the hospital. I worked in the hospital. I went to graduate school. And that's that. And here I am.

Liz, given all that transpired, including coming to the United States, and experiencing what you described in school, did you, at any point, feel like you had kind of a typical teenager's life? Was that ever--

Oh, absolutely not.

Not at all throughout your life.

No. Gosh, no. Not at all. I mean, I was different.

And you never talked about it. I regret that so much, that my mother and I didn't sit down and talk about it. But it was just too painful. It was just too awful.

And it wasn't until I came to the museum that I could really feel, and people could tell me, yes, of course, this is the name of the camp where you were, if you went there that year. And this is what happened here and this is what happened here. And it's like a second part of my life.

And then, when we went back to Poland, we went to see Wisia. Actually, we had sent packages to her mother for years. And then, when my father died, then my mother really didn't have the means to do that. She had to take care of herself. And so we stopped.

And by then, Mrs. Bandyrowa was dead, and my mother said, well, the two young women have husbands, and they can manage for themselves. But I was curious to see the girls.

And we went to Poland. And we couldn't find them. I looked in the telephone book. There was nobody.

And we went to Auschwitz. And we met a gentleman who was a professor of Jewish history from Oxford. And he-- we gave him a ride, because we had a car. And we started talking. And I told him a little bit of my story.

And he said, you have to go back and talk to her. And I said, I don't know how to find her. And he said, don't you have an address? And I said, yes. And he said, you just go and ring the doorbell.

So we went, and I rang the doorbell. And the voice said who is it. And I said, I'm looking for Mrs.-- her name is Krzymowska now. And I said, I'm looking for Wisława Krzymowska I'm showing off. See how well I speak Polish.

And she said, come on up. And I came up. And I'm in my 50s, and she's nine years older than I am. So she's in her 60s. And I look at her, and I say to her, Wisia, do you remember me? And she says, no.

And I'm shocked. How can she not remember me? And I tell her who I am. And we start kissing, and we start hugging. And our husbands are standing there looking at us like we're kind of nuts.

And she says, oh, I'm so happy to see you. And she invites us to dinner. And we eat, and we exchange pictures, and we're so happy.

And now I have a chance to help her, because she's not really in very good financial situation. But the museum sends people to Poland on a regular basis. And whoever goes to Warsaw takes money in for me.

So I sent her money every day-- every year. And when I retired from work, she wrote me and she said, maybe you can't afford to send me money anymore because you're retired. And I said it's, OK. It's OK. I'll manage.

And she told me a lot of things about-- that had happened there, that I, of course, I didn't remember. She told me that there was another family that was sheltering Jews, and they were found out. And both families were killed. They were shot.

The Jewish family and the--

The Jewish family and the Christian family. And I said to her, how could your mother take a risk like that? And she said, my mother felt everybody deserved a chance. She was an amazing woman.

Did her mother or her parents survive long after the war?

Yes. I think her father died first. Her mother died maybe in the '80s.

You said that you were in touch--

No, no, no. I'm sorry. In the '70s.

'70s. You had been in touch with them early, and then you lost touch.

Yes, yes, then lost touch.

How were you-- do you know how you were able to establish contact with her after you'd come to the United States?

I think she wrote to us.

She did. OK.

Yeah. And we wrote-- we wrote to the old address, and maybe they forwarded it.

Is her older sister still alive?

No, her oldest sister died. I'm trying to think. We were in Poland in 1990, and I think she died maybe six or seven years later.

Have you been back since then?

No, just that one time.

Just that one time.

But I've just been invited to go to Belzec for the monument. They're building a monument at Belzec. And that's where my grandmother died. So I'm seriously thinking about going, maybe. And Belzec was a killing camp there.

Yes, yes.

When will you be doing that?

June.

June of this year? Mm-hmm.

I have to sit down and figure it out.

Right. Right.

I think we're almost at the point, Liz, where I think we can turn to our audience, and ask them if they have any questions. And if they're shy about asking questions, then I'll continue to ask them. But I'd like to-- I'm sure they won't be. So I see a hand going up already. Ma'am. And I will repeat the question before Liz answers it so we all hear it.



--in the camp at that time.

The question is, was Yiddish spoken when you were young? Do you know Yiddish. And how did you communicate-- if you didn't, how did you communicate with folks in the DP camps?

No, I think maybe it was spoken in my grandmother's house, but not with my mother and my father, which was probably a good thing because I spoke pure Polish without an accent. So I was Polish. It was easier for me to get--

I don't know. I think kids communicate without words. I think you learn very fast.

Mm-hmm. OK. Sir?

You said that it was easy for you to adopt that Catholic religion because you weren't really raised Jewish. You said that your parents didn't raise you religious initially. Does that mean that it changed during the war or after the war, that your parents became more religious or more Jewish afterwards?

The question is, Liz is asked, since she-- they weren't a very religious family, it was easy to adopt to the Catholic faith-- easier to do so at that time. The question is, since then, after the war, have you become more religious?

Right. In a nutshell, yes, of course, when I was very small, we didn't do anything. Or if my parents did, I don't know about it. My father left when I was 16 months old. And then the Germans were already in power when we were with my grandmother, and the same in the camp. So we never had a chance to do anything.

But neither of my parents was very religious. I became more so after I got married. And certainly my children went to Hebrew school, and were bar and bat mitzvahed. And my daughter married a Jewish doctor. And she's a Jewish doctor too. And my son isn't married. But they all know.

Right here.

Yes.

[INAUDIBLE]

And the second question is, how do you think we should-- what we should do in the third generation that lives in Israel to remember the things that you have mentioned?

The question is, first, do you have family members that are still in Israel? They moved to Israel and they're still there. And then the second question is, what advice you have for the third generation in Israel as to how they can ensure remembering all that you have described.

I'm sure that there must be-- there must be family there. They must have gone before the war. And when we were trying to get to Israel initially, my mother and I, she was hoping she would find somebody. But I don't know.

She had friends there, because my mother would make trips to Israel regularly. And she would have friends that she stayed with.

I guess-- I don't know. I don't know how to answer the second question.

Here, this museum is really a fantastic place, and people who come here, and they're awed by what's going on here, and they talk to their friends, and they talk to their children-- I guess just talk about it. I don't know.

Liz, in that vein. Let me take the prerogative of asking you another question. At what point did you start

talking to your own children about what you went through?

Probably when they were teenagers.

Did any particular event precipitate that, or you just thought the time was right?

I think I thought-- I mean, they always knew that I had come from a different country. I think when they were teenagers. And I remember there was a special TV show about a family in Germany that was sent to, I think, Auschwitz. And I wasn't going to watch it. And they said they would watch it for me, because they felt the need to help me in that way.

Do you remember how they reacted when you first told them?

Well, you know, it was stylized. It wasn't-- the people weren't-- it's not like Schindler's List.

No, I mean, when you first-- when you first told them what you'd been through.

Teenagers are very strange. No offense. No offense.

No need to say anymore.

No offense. No offense. It doesn't apply to any teenager in the room, of course.

They were sorry I had suffered, and they were sorry.

And I'm in a book that someone has written. I'm the chapter on Poland. And it's in the store. It's called *Escape or Die*, by Ina Friedman. And she wrote a book called *Black Cop* also. So I had the books, and they started reading.

But then there was a prom, and then there was cheerleader, whatever. So it's--

Teenagers. OK. We have a question here, and then one back there. OK?

It's kind of confusing to me about what you were talking about with your dad. He was in the Polish army, and then he went to Siberia with the Russian--

Well, he went as a prisoner.

Trying to understand the sequence of events.

Right. And then-- but when the Germans came, or when somebody else came you had to say he was in a concentration camp. If you could just kind of run through that sequence of events.

And it is--

Why that changed--

She's--

[CROSS TALK] tell them that he had gone to Siberia, why that--

The question is just to clarify her father's transition from going from Poland as a prisoner of the Soviets, being in Siberia, and then being released by the Soviets, and then serving in an army at that point.

Right. He went from-- he, because, he went to his parents, who were in the Russian sector, and then tried to get back to us--

Which was in the German sector.

--which was in the German sector, he was sent as a prisoner to Siberia, OK? Then when there was-- when General Anders came, he took all the Poles and some Jews to make a brigade to fight against that. But when we were talking-- when my mother and I were in hiding, when the Germans came, we could say he was in Siberia because that would be appropriate. But when the Russians came, we couldn't say he was in Siberia because then they might have shot us or said, if he was that-- so it was just--

Does that help? OK, good. And then I had one back there. Yes, young lady there.

Hello, when your mother was able to purchase the papers that enabled you to hide, was that money that she had had from before the war, or did she earn that money working as a tailor, a seamstress?

The question is, when your mother purchased the papers, did she use money that somehow she'd been able to hang on to, or was it money she had earned while she was in the ghetto?

The Germans didn't pay slave labor. So it was not new money. It was money that she and my mother and my grandmother had either sewn into their clothes or taken with them, because they were, when they went into the ghetto, they were allowed to take a suitcase of stuff. And so they took valuables.

You've asked a very important question. It's important to understand that when her mother and others that were in the ghettos were going to work, they were going to work as slaves with absolutely no remuneration for doing that.

OK. Right smack in the middle, and then I'm going to try and get the rest of you behind you. OK.

I was just wondering, I've heard that sometimes the people who come back to Poland, that there has been some negative reaction. And I was wondering how receptive the Polish people [INAUDIBLE]. So I was just wondering how they were [INAUDIBLE].

The question is, what was the reception from Poles when you went back to Poland having heard that some Jews had gone back and had negative reactions.

Well, certainly, Wisia and her husband, and her daughter, and her son-in-law, and her granddaughter were happy to see us. But she said to us, and they both said to us, now you are not Jews. You are Americans. It's still bad here. And she said-- in some places. So you don't have to tell people anything.

I just remembered. We had a funny experience. We were staying in a hotel in Warsaw, and we had gone to Kraków and Auschwitz. And then we had come back very late. So we got up late for breakfast.

And we were standing in line. And the people in front of us were ugly Americans, as they say. And they were, well, what do you mean there's no food? What do you mean there's this? What do you mean that? And really being very, very nasty.

And so my husband said, what's going on? And I said, they don't think there's any food. And my husband is one of these people that has to have breakfast. That's one of his things.

So I said to the lady-- and Polish is a very flowery language. So I said, I must tell you, this is the first time I've been back to my country. And I went to Kraków because that's where I was born. And I was just so overwhelmed by memories that we got back late. And would you please forgive us, but is there anything you have to feed us? And she said to the other person, give them anything they want. So.

OK. We had some other hands back there. How about in the yellow?

[INAUDIBLE]

There's two yellows.

There's two yellows. You're right. The lighter shade of yellow in front of the other yellow. How's that?  
[LAUGHS]

Despite the negative experience with the Catholic priest, you did have subsequent encounters with Catholicism. Has that impacted your-- like now, later on? How has that worked with being Jewish later on? How does that all sort of come together for you.

In terms of how she feels about Catholics or--

[CROSS TALK] talking about Catholics. Were there any tenets that you were able to still practice, or help you continue to grow, and--

So let me see if I can paraphrase that. The question is, in light of what you experienced with the priest when you learned that you were not Catholic, but still having interacted with Catholics later, how has that affected you today, and just in general, your thoughts.

Well, I was never a Catholic technically. I mean, I was always Jewish. But I was pretending to be, even though I didn't know it.

I still get a very funny feeling when I go into a church. I feel very at home in churches. I've been to weddings, and I can remember lots of things. So it's been a very, very positive, very positive experience. I can relate to it.

OK. And I think we probably have one more in the-- young fellow back there in the yellow.

When did you get baptized [INAUDIBLE]?

The question is, when did you-- but I guess the question is, did you get baptized? Was that part of what you experienced in the Catholic church?

No. No, because I came to Milanówek age five or however, and the assumption was that I have already been baptized.

They just believed that was the case.

Yeah.

Right, right. OK.

And I didn't have a baptismal certificate, but there was a war, and my mother said it was lost, and maybe we could write to the church, and they would send it to us. But of course, we never did.

OK we're going to take one more question back here, in the-- I believe in green. Yes, yes you.

Me?

Yes.

I was wondering, do you feel like you're more Polish or more American? Question is, do you feel like you're more Polish or more American?

When I came here, I was 13. And when I became an American citizen, I was 18. And I had to swear that I would give up my national-- my everything. I'm American. I'm American of Polish descent, but I'm American 100%.

I'm going to ask one question before we wrap up. One more question if I might, Liz. And you mentioned to

me that your daughter got married in 1993. And an incredibly joyous event. But it was also-- had a profound effect on you in light of your experience during the Holocaust.

Right.

Tell us about that.

Yeah. There was no family. There was not a single member of my family that was at this wedding. My husband had family. Her husband, both sides had family-- grandparents, uncles, aunts, children. And there was not a soul, my family.

And then it hits you. You say 6 million people. And it's a tremendous, huge amount. But maybe 100 of those people or 200 of those people were my people. My grandmother was one of nine children. And if you extrapolate that, and you say, OK, they each married, and they had three or four children each, and you're talking lots and lots, and there isn't anybody. And it's very sad.

Liz, thank you so much for being willing to serve as our First Person, and to just give us what can only be a glimpse into what you experienced as a very young child going through the almost unimaginable experiences of being in hiding, being somebody that you weren't, even if you didn't know it at the time entirely, and then going through all the changes you've described. We really appreciate that immensely.

And before I turn back to Liz to close out our program, I'd like to let you know that we do first person every Wednesday. Next Wednesday, on March 31, we will present at 1 o'clock another first person.

And our first person next Wednesday is Mrs. Charlene Schiff. Mrs. Schiff, who is also from Poland, crossed a river and escaped into the forest as a young teenager, and hid in the forest for two full years before her liberation. If you're not able to see the special exhibit "Life and Shadows-- Hidden Children in the Holocaust" today, I hope you can return next week, March 31, to both hear Mrs. Schiff and to see the exhibit.

It's our tradition here at first person that our First Person has the last word. So with that, I'd like to turn back to Liz for any closing thoughts that you might share with us.

I just want-- thank you for coming. And thank you for being so patient. And cherish your families. Cherish your children, your parents, your grandparents. Because everything can be replaced, but not your families. Families are a wonderful thing. I wish I had one. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]