

Good afternoon. Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's First Person program. My name is Edna Friedberg, and I am a historian here at the museum.

Today's "first person" is Mrs. Hannah Kastan Weiss, who we shall meet in a few moments. But before we begin, I have a few housekeeping-type announcements about the format of today's program.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share their first-hand experiences with us here in the Rubinstein Auditorium. This year's programs have been generously funded by William Goldring and the Woldenberg Foundation.

This afternoon we will listen to Hannah Kastan Weiss for about 40 minutes as she shares her life experiences during and after the Holocaust with us, for about 40 minutes. After that, you will have a chance to ask questions of Hannah yourself. So if you think of something that you want to know that we don't cover during our conversation, save it for the end, and we'll have plenty of time for that then.

Out of respect for our special guest, we ask that you please remain seated for the duration of the program. If you are holding passes for the permanent exhibition for 1:15, 1:30, or later, they will be honored for the rest of the afternoon. So there's no need to rush out of here you can stay til 2:00 and still get into the permanent exhibition with those passes.

Photography is not permitted during the program. And also, if you have any cell phones or pagers, please go ahead and turn them off now so that we won't hear them in the middle.

Finally, your thoughts about this program are very important to us. You should have received a form, an evaluation form, when you came into the auditorium. At the end, please fill it out and give it to the attendant as you exit.

Now we'll turn to the story of our guest, our "first person," Hannah Kastan Weiss. In March 1943, Hannah Kastan was four years old, and was rounded up with her parents in Berlin and taken to Berlin's Jewish old-age home, which was one of the key deportation points in Berlin. Hannah's grandmother, who was a non-Jew, was able to smuggle her granddaughter away to safety. And we will be hearing about her experiences as a hidden child here today.

For more than two years, Hannah remained hidden in her grandparents apartment. And today's First Person program, as every week, we focus on the story of one individual. Every individual story is, of course different, and not necessarily typical of the Holocaust experience. So we'll just keep that in mind during the program.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to give you a little historical context for our conversation. So we'll go ahead and watch that now.

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.

Hannah Kastan was born in Berlin in 1938, the only child of Gert and Charlotte Kastan. Charlotte was Jewish, and Gert was defined as Jewish by the Reich Citizenship Law of Nazi Germany, although one of his parents was not Jewish.

In March, 1943, when she was four years old, Hannah and her parents were arrested and brought with other Jews to a Jewish home for the elderly in Berlin. This was a key assembly point for deportations to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Hearing of the arrest, Hannah's paternal grandmother went to the gathering, looking for her son and his family. She saw her granddaughter and managed to pull her away from the crowd. Hannah's parents remained behind and were deported.

Hannah's mother never returned from Auschwitz-Birkenau. Her father, with help, was able to smuggle letters from the killing center to his parents and daughter. He was reported killed in February 1945 while on a death march.

Hannah and her grandparents came to the United States in 1947. Today, Hannah Kastan Weiss lives in Illinois.

Please join me in welcoming our very special guest, Hannah Kastan Weiss.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you for joining us today, and also for traveling all the way from Illinois to be here.

You're welcome.

As we saw in the video, you were born in Berlin in 1938. Why don't we begin by talking a little bit about your parents, where they were from, how and when they met, their life?

OK. OK. My parents, Günter Kastan, and my mother Charlotte Sonja Kastan. My mother was born in Berlin, Germany in 1913. And my father was born in Breslau, which is now Poland, which was Germany at the time he was born. He was born in June 1914.

Apparently, they met at a dance. And that's when they got married. And that's when I appeared.

And what did they do for a living?

My father was an electrician, and my mother worked as a secretary in Berlin. My father immigrated from Breslau to Berlin in late 1937 because there were too many people who knew my family in Breslau, and they figured if they went to Berlin, which was a much larger city, that they wouldn't be that well known as Jews.

So they could blend into the crowd.

They could blend in much more easily. And in 1937, even though it was a terrible time already since 1933, they thought, well, maybe they would have a better chance in a larger city than in a small city.

So you were actually born in November 1938. Is that correct?

Yes, I was born exactly two weeks after Kristallnacht. I was born November 23, 1938, and Kristallnacht happened on November the 9th, 1938. Whether I was premature because of all the excitement that my mother had gone through, I don't know. I never had a chance to ask anyone. But I did appear in November of 1938.

For those members of our audience who may not know, could you tell a little bit about Kristallnacht?

Yes. Kristallnacht, which happened in November 9, 1938, was the beginning, basically, of the Holocaust. There was a young man, a Polish young man, who assassinated one of the German officials. And that was a good reason for the Germans to start a pogrom, so to speak, against all the Jews, particularly at this time in Germany.

They set synagogues or temples on fire. They arrested many Jews from the street, particularly men, and sent them to the first concentration camp, which was outside of Berlin. It was the beginning of what turned out to be, as we know it, as the Holocaust.

So it was a moment of great violence when you emerged in the world.

Yes, it was violence. As I become older, I realize what my parents and grandparents had really been through. You only realize that as you do become older. And to live through a time like that must have been absolutely horrendous for them, to have a newborn child being brought into the world, and they didn't know what was happening to the world.

It must have been very frightening.

It was extremely frightening, obviously, to my parents and my grandparents. I, thank god, was a little baby at the time, so I didn't know what was going on around me.

Tell us a little bit about your grandparents, please.

My grandparents-- excuse me. My grandparents on my mother's side were born in Russia, and had immigrated to Germany in approximately 1909, 1910, had taken up the German language, had been incorporated into the German way of life, but were still thought upon not as German but as Russians, and were deported among one of the first transports that came out of Berlin. They were deported on January the 13th, which, incidentally, was my mother's birthday, 1942, and were sent to Riga, which is in Latvia.

And my grandparents at that time were in their early 60s, the same age that I am now. They looked much older, of course, not only because of the terrible times that they had gone through. And we never heard from them again.

We knew that a lot of the elderly Jewish people who were deported at that time were killed as soon as they arrived at the concentration camps. So we never heard from my grandparents on my mother's side.

My other grandparents on my father's side, my grandmother was born Catholic, converted to Judaism, when she married my grandfather, who was Jewish. So for all of her life, as she was married at 18 to my grandfather, all of her life, to me she was always Jewish. My father was brought up in the Jewish faith. He was bar mitzvahed. He was, obviously, circumcised.

So to me, my grandmother in my eyes was always Jewish. Thankfully, in the eyes of the Germans, she was still Gentile. Whether she converted or not in their eyes, she was a Gentile woman. And that basically saved my grandfather from being deported to Auschwitz or to any of the death camps, and it actually saved my life.

My grandparents were young-looking. There was only a 45-year difference between my grandmother and me, and she still looked rather young. And one of my grandfather's friends, who, believe it or not, was a member of the Nazi party, but told my grandfather-- they had been friends before 1933, before all of this happened-- they still remained friends-- not openly, obviously. But whenever there was a roundup, or what we used to call a razzia, he told my grandfather to go into hiding and to hide me, because the roundup was coming, and the German-- either the Gestapo or the other secret police-- came and rounded up Jews.

So he warned him.

He warned him. And one of the warnings that he had was, since I was very small-- during those times, even though I was a small child, a baby, I did not receive milk or any of the nourishment that you would usually feed a young child. So I was very, very tiny for my age. And I remember my grandparents putting me, hiding me in an attic. Or sometimes we had a huge basement in the house that we lived in in Berlin. And they put me in a wicker basket.

And the reason for the wicker basket was that there is, if you remember, there's little holes in wicker baskets. And that made me breathe. I was able to breathe through the wicker basket.

But it was very dark in there, and I didn't know why I was being put in there. I thought, well, maybe I did something terrible. Because you have to remember, at this time I was three or four years old.

And I always knew that my grandparents would come and get me out, and then they would hug and kiss me and everything. So in my baby mind, I figured, well, I guess I wasn't really that bad. But why are they hiding me here? And of course, obviously, they never explained it to me.

Hannah, if I could just stop you a moment to back up. So your maternal grandparents were deported fairly early, several

months after deportations began from Berlin, because they were considered foreign.

Yes.

Although they had lived there in Germany for over 30 years. That's correct?

For over 30 years. My mother was born in Germany, and her brother, my uncle, was also born in Germany. But they were still considered foreigners. And they never had a passport. They were called stateless. Never had a German passport.

And then also, just to clarify about Hannah's paternal grandmother, even though she had converted to Judaism at such a young age, because the Nazis defined Jewishness as a racial or biological quality, it didn't matter what she believed or practiced. It was something inherent to her, to her body. And that's why she was not considered Jewish. And actually, ironically, this protected her husband.

Now before 1943, before your parents were deported, what were their conditions like in Berlin, and what you know?

Well, I can't remember my parents, unfortunately. And isn't that a sad thing to say, that a human being can't remember her parents. I can't. The only way that I remember my parents are through photos and through what my grandmother was able to tell me. To me, that's not only sad, but when you when you walk through the museum here, and you see the exhibits of the children, most of them didn't know their parents except only through the photographs.

But anyway, going back to my story, in--

I just was-- were your parents forced to perform labor, forced labor?

Yes, my mother was forced to do labor at Siemens company, which was a huge company in Berlin. And as a matter of fact, they're still in business worldwide, Siemens company. And my father was also forced to do electrical work because he was an electrician in Berlin until March of 1943.

And what happened then?

March, or the end of February 1943, there was the last roundup of Jews in Berlin. And they remained until 1943 because their labor was required for the war effort, believe it or not. And then, in the end of February and beginning of March, they were all rounded up.

Including you?

Including me. And scheduled to go to the concentration camps, primarily Auschwitz, which at this time had built up quite a reputation. And that was the camp out-- the only thing that they ever said was "the camp out to the east." You were being shipped to the east, and nobody knew really what that east was, except that there were little rumors coming back and forth that you never came back.

And so you too, small girl that you were, would have been sent east as well if not for your grandmother, right?

I would have been sent east with my parents. My parents would have been separated as soon as the train arrived at Auschwitz. It was usually a four- to six-day train ride from Berlin to Auschwitz. And as I understand, quite a few people died on those four to six days, and they arrived at Auschwitz already dead.

If I had been on the transport, we would have been separated at the train station. My father would have gone one way. My mother and I would have gone another way, because they usually took the women who had children, probably under the age of four or five years old, they took them directly to the gas chambers. They didn't want to create a scene at the railway station, because mothers obviously were not about to give up their children. And four- and five-year-old children could not, obviously, work.

But they did not tear the very young children from their mothers. They sent both of them, or if there were more than one child, they sent them directly to the gas chamber.

As it was, I did not go along. And we'll get into that a little later, why I wasn't transported with them. But as it turned out, my mother was at Auschwitz till about July of 1944. And she did forced labor, because at that time she was only 30 years old. And of course, she was able to work. And I never found out how my mother died.

So how was your grandmother able to save you?

This friend, again, who was a member of the Nazi party, had told my grandfather, why don't you register the child as your own, as opposed to your grandchild? I was considered a full Jew because I-- my mother and her family were Jewish. So I had three grandparents who were Jewish and a mother and a father who were considered Jewish. So I was a full Jew.

But because of the Nuremberg Laws, my grandmother was not considered Jewish, even though, as I said before, she had converted. He said, register her as your child. That way she would have a mother-- meaning my grandmother, really, who was a non-Jew. And that's how they saved me through the war.

Physically, it wasn't just easy for someone to walk out and avoid, evade deportation. How did she physically get you away from the deportation place?

As I was told-- because you have to remember, I was still four years old. And a four year old's memory is not there, obviously.

We were in a huge yard in Berlin at the deportation center. And there were approximately over 1,000 people who had been deported on that particular day. And they kept the children separate, the young children, which included myself, in a separate place in the yard. It was a huge yard there.

And apparently, my grandmother came to the Gestapo there. And she said she wanted to get my father free. She wanted to release-- have my father released, because she said, well, since I'm a Gentile-- and that means that my son is half Gentile, and so on and so forth. Well, the Gestapo said, no, he's Jewish. He's married to a Jewish woman. He's Jewish.

So apparently what happened is that she saw me, took my hand, and walked out with me. And to this day, I don't know how that happened.

But as you know, if you're familiar with any of the stories of the survivors, we only survive through sheer luck. There was no money involved, no people who are brilliant in their minds. It was absolute luck that people survived in the concentration camps, that people survived in Berlin, that people survived anywhere. So you only see us as survivors here not because someone put in a good word for us, or somebody put in some money for us, or somebody was smart enough, or had enough gall, or had enough chutzpah, or whatever. It was pure luck. And if you ever read some of the stories where people were lined up, and each fifth one was shot, it was luck that the one standing next to him and the one standing on his left wasn't shot.

So to me, that I was saved in Berlin, and that my grandmother could take my hand and walk me out under the eyes of the Nazis, to me, 60 years later, is a miracle. And it's nothing but luck.

It sounds like luck with some courage or even foolhardiness on the part of your--

I think--

--grandmother.

No. I think, you know what it was? A grandparent or a parent does anything for his or her child. And you always hear, I

would give my life for my child. Yeah. I mean, that doesn't even have to do with the Holocaust. Anybody in this audience, I'm sure, would do the same for their child, or for their grandchild, or maybe even for a parent.

So she didn't see the danger. I'm sure she saw it, but she overlooked that danger. Her prime concern was, I need to get my granddaughter away from here.

And we were very lucky-- as I said, again, luck-- that a Gestapo agent didn't come up to her and say, where are you going?

So she took you by the hand and she took you home.

And we went home.

And is that when the wicker basket you were talking about--

That's the basket. Now the bad part also is that even though I was registered now as their child, and not their grandchild, which gave me particular privileges, some people knew that I was their grandchild, and that I was full Jewish.

But again, luck. They never said anything. They only threatened my grandparents, saying, if you don't cooperate with what we have to do, we will tell the Gestapo that you are hiding a Jewish child, in your house and that child is not your own daughter, but your granddaughter whose parents have been deported. Again, luck that no one said anything.

So there was this constant threat of denunciation--

Constant, constant threat. And when there was a roundup, they did hide me, because they were afraid that somebody would come and say, yes, this is not a mixed child of mixed religion. This is a Jewish child. And I would be gone.

So you were hidden both physically, but also in terms of your identity.

Yes. Also my identity, yes.

So how long did you stay physically hidden?

It was off and on. Whenever there was a roundup, which came quite frequently-- maybe once a month, maybe every week-- it was always a surprise. I mean, obviously, they didn't say when they were going to round up. That's when I would be hidden. And in Berlin, I think there were over 1,000 people who went what we call underground, or the U-Boats the U-Boote. And that's how they saved their life, that they were-- that they were hiding. And that's how I saved my life.

Were you ever able to go outside?

Very rarely. As I became older, meaning five and six, when you do have recognition of yourself, I always wondered, why are there no children that I could play with?

I loved flowers. I loved the outside. And we had a huge yard with lots of flowers that somebody else had planted. And one day, I went out, and I picked all the flowers.

And my grandmother became hysterical because the garden belonged to one of the Nazi members.

Who was a neighbor.

Who was a neighbor. And now she thought, all right, that's the end of it. All of-- just for picking flowers, these very simple things in life became huge to anybody who lived under those kinds of circumstances.