

Good afternoon and welcome to 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. And our first person today is Mrs. Erika Eckstut, whom we shall meet shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust and during World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here in the museum each Wednesday through August 25, except for August the 11th, we will have a new First Person guest. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a preview of upcoming First Person guests. This 2004 season of First Person is made possible by the generosity of both the William Goldring and Woldenberg Foundation and the Helena Rubenstein foundation. We are grateful to both for making this year's program possible.

Erika 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 Erika some questions. Before you are introduced to her, I have a couple of requests of you. First, if possible, please, stay seated in your seats throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions for Erika while she's speaking.

And second, during the question and answer period, if you have a question-- we sure hope you will-- please, try to make your question as brief as possible. I will repeat the question so all in the room can hear it, including Erika. And then Erika will respond to your question. I'd also like to let those of you who may be holding passes to the permanent exhibition this afternoon know that they are good for the balance of the afternoon. So no need to worry that you might not be able to get in if you stay through the duration of our program.

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-- over six 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.

What you are about to hear from Erika is one individual's account of the Holocaust. Erika was just 13 years old when the Germans occupied Romania in 1941. After being forced into a ghetto by the Germans, Erika's family made the painful decision to save Erika and her sister by giving them false identities as Christians and sending them out of the ghetto. From then until the end of the war, the two sisters struggled to survive and found themselves on the run to avoid being betrayed for being Jewish. In 1960, Erika made it to the United States.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Erika's introduction. We begin with Dolly and Ephram-- that's Erika's parents-- posing with daughters Erika and Beatrice. Erika is the youngest. This photo was taken between 1933 and 1934. The first arrow in our map of Europe shows Czechoslovakia, where Erika was born, in Znojmo.

The second arrow shows Romania, where the Neuman family moved in 1930. They moved to Stoenesti, where Erika's father became mayor. In this next picture, Erika's father, Ephram Neuman, poses with the students of the Stoenesti Hebrew school which he founded. Erika, Beatrice, and Ephram are in the photograph. Right in the middle at the top is her father. Directly below him under his tie is Beatrice. And then if you move farther down, in the white blouse, you see Erika. Behind the two girls in the very front row that are lying on the ground, right behind them is Erika.

We next have a group portrait of the Neuman family in a garden. Seated, from left to right, are Feige Pesie Neuman, who's Erika's grandmother. In the middle is her great-grandmother. And then next to her is her grandfather, Abraham Neuman. And standing left to right are Max Neuman and Erika's parents, Dolly and Ephram Neuman.

This is an identification card bearing a large yellow star issued by the County Office of the Jews in Czernowitz to Erika Neuman, authorizing her to remain in Czernowitz rather than be deported in 1942. In this photo, Erika Neuman reads a magazine in the Czernowitz ghetto. The picture was taken sometime between 1941 and 1942.

We close with a wedding portrait of Erika Neuman and Robert Kauder on August 28, 1945. Today, Erika lives here in the Washington, DC area with her husband, Donnie, who is with us in the audience. Donnie, if you would, wave. Thank you, Donny.

While Erika was not able to resume her medical studies that she began in Prague, Czechoslovakia after the war, she started a career as a medical technician after arriving in the United States. Erika has a son and a daughter, six grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. Erika volunteers here at the museum's donor desk and membership desk, where you will find her on Thursdays. And with that, I would like to ask you to join me in welcoming our first person, Erika Eckstut.

Erika, welcome, and thank you for being willing to be our first person today.

It's my pleasure to be the first person. I have to make sure that that works. And I'll be very happy to answer any question you have.

Good. Erika, you were born in a small town in Czechoslovakia. And then your family moved to a small town in Romania when you were very young. In 1940, Romania was occupied by the Russians. And then in 1941, when you were just 13, Germany entered Romania, forever changing your family's life and that of your community. Before we turn to those terrible years, perhaps you could begin today by telling us about yourself, your family, your community in the years before the war began for you.

I remember very well before. I always thought that I had the best childhood any child could ever have. When we were in Czechoslovakia, I was not quite two years when we left, so much I don't remember from there. But when we came to Romania, my grandparents, they absolutely adored us. They didn't have any other children there. My father was the only living son in Europe they had. And just the two of us, that's all they had. And they were just wonderful. My grandfather, he was just fantastic.

My sister was a very good girl. She was very good when she was born. She was quiet and she never made much noise. And it was very nice. Then when I came after a while, it wasn't like that at all. I wasn't quiet. I wasn't good. I liked life and-- just something should go on. And my grandfather, who didn't have a grandson, just the two of us-- and he saw that I was willing to be a boy, if necessary. It didn't bother me at all. So he really helped me to become very bad. I was a very bad girl.

I think rather than bad girl, I think you described yourself as a-- or referred to as a wild duck. Is that right?

Yeah. I did do that. I did remember that. Yeah, a wild duck or whatever. I can't really-- I can't remember very well. And I remember, I also apologized to my sister the way I behaved to her because I didn't behave right to her, either. To this day, I am still very, very nice to her. I try to be.

To make up for that.

To make up, it was bad.

Erika, tell us a little bit about your father. Among other things, He was a veteran of the First World War, had been wounded in the First World War.

Yeah. He was wounded very badly in the legs. He had a lot of operations. And I could never sit on his lap, which was bothering me. Now, nobody can sit on my lap because I have both knees also operated, but not because of the war. I was not in the war. But my father was wounded very badly. And then he became a lawyer.

And when he came to Stoenesti, he became the mayor of the town. It was not a big town. It was really a small town. But he became the mayor. And I never had any problems with anybody. I don't know if it was because my father had a position there. Or whatever it was, I never had any problems with anybody.

And we talked about this earlier-- at that point in your life, you told me that you didn't really experience much antisemitism in your town.

No. I didn't really experience any antisemitisms at all. And whoever invited me to their house and gave me food, I ate wherever I went. I really liked to eat. And whoever invited me, I went, and I ate. And people liked me, I think, because I ate so much.

So they're always willing to invite you over.

Yeah.

Erika, you had relatives in the United States at that time, didn't you?

Yes. We had three brothers of my father who were in the United States. And that's what we had. Then a brother of my mother came also to the United States from Paris. But we had relatives in the United States before the war. They left, I don't know, in 1901 or 1902 before the war--

Before the First World War, yes.

--First World War, yeah.

Erika, before we move on to and leave behind, sadly, what had been very good times to what became terrible times, one thing I'd like you to share with the audience-- you shared with me a little bit more about your father and that he not only would make you read a book, but it was real important to him that you then did what?

Then I had to tell him what was the moral of the story. When I read a book or I went to a movie-- I liked to go to a movie. I didn't like to read. But I loved to go to movies. But whenever I came home, he would want the moral of the story. It took me forever to figure out what was the moral of the story. So the reading wasn't really my strong thing. But the movie was. But I always had a problem with-- that I had to tell him.

I also got a lot of lectures from my father. And boy, could he talk. I always said, if I would have gotten a few on the behind-- that time it was legal-- I didn't have to sit there for an hour or so and listen to everything. But I had to listen. I couldn't do without it.

You had no choice there.

No choice, I had to listen. And I figured out-- not always exactly, but what the moral of the story was. When I started to go to school in the first grade, I remember, I was very happy to be in school. There were so many kids. And I could have played with all of them. And I asked everybody their name. And then the teacher said, OK, now, you will sit down. We'll start the class. I said, excuse me I didn't ask all the kids the names here? She said, you'll have to do it later, not now. And when I finished the first grade, I had all excellent. And when we started the second grade, I saw that not the teacher, but the-- who is a whole big--

Like principal?

--principal came to my father's office. And when I saw him, I disappeared. But I had to be home for dinner. And after dinner, my father said, could you bring the book and read to me? I said, sure. And you see, my sister read when she was five years old. She read books. And I was six now, already after six and almost seven. No, I was, I think, seven because I started second grade.

And my father wanted me to read. And he opened the book. And I read it perfect. He closed it. He opened it. No problem, I read every single word. Third time, he really looking if I leave something out-- nothing. He said to my mother, I don't know if he is something wrong with him. What is he talking? She reads beautiful.

And then, all of a sudden, he closes the book. And it was from the first grade, the book. And he puts his hand on the picture. And I was dead. I couldn't read. I couldn't read the words. And then they a teacher. And he taught me how to read. But I must admit that, later on, I made it up.

Yes, you did--

I liked to read.

--on your way to medical school much later.

I did. But I wasn't very good in the beginning. Erika, of course, life for you and your community changed dramatically when the Germans entered your town. You have strong memories of what you saw in those first-- really, the opening moments and days of the Germans arriving. Will you tell us about that time?

Yes. Like you said before, we had-- before the Germans came, we had there for a year the Russians. And at that time, of course, I had no more problem reading, or writing, or anything. And I learned the Russian language very easy. I had no problems. And I really made everything very well. Then the Russians left. It was very careful you had to be when the Russians were there. But I went to school. And I really didn't have problems.

So you still were able to stay in school when the Russians were running things?

Oh, when the Russians were, we were all in school. We all learned Russian. And then when the Russians left, I really don't know how it happened, but about four men came to our house and told us that we are going to go with them. And my father said, where are we going? He said, you will see. They weren't very nice to my father when he talked.

And when we went, we went to the end of the town. And there was a park. It didn't have like here now you have for children to do something. But it was a little park. And there, in this little park, was-- there were 500 Jews-- about 500 in the little town. And they were all standing there. And in the middle of it was standing our rabbi and his two sons. He had a daughter too. She wasn't there. And his wife wasn't there, just the rabbi and his two sons.

You see, I have never, ever done any wrong. I was a tomboy, really wild duck, whatever you want, I was it there. But I have never, ever hurt anybody. And all of a sudden, I saw our rabbi and the two sons being killed. I wasn't the only child my age there. And it was very, very bad for us. And I felt, if I lost my father, my father is so smart, he's going to give me the right answer.

And so I asked my father, I said, do I have to die? I said, I haven't lived yet. And my father didn't give me a very good answer. He said, please, don't cry. And my sister, and I, and my friend, we stood there. Then they took my friend's father. It was very hard not to cry, very, very hard. And the two of us stayed there. And we did not cry. And then, all of a sudden, they didn't have, really, any more ammunition. And they had my uncle there. And they killed him by hand. And it was a terrible thing.

They killed many more than the rabbi and his two sons.

Oh, they killed almost all the men.

With you standing there?

With us standing there. And then they ran out of ammunition. I mean, that went on. It was terrible. And they put us in the courthouse. And my father was a smoker. And he stood at the door. And he smoked. And the guy said to him, I'll take you home. My father says, I'm not going go anywhere without my family. Said, I'll take your family, your parents too. And so he took us-- that guy took us home.

And as we left, the other guy said, we'll get him tomorrow. And tomorrow, they did come. But they didn't come for my grandfather or for anybody but my father. And my sister wouldn't let him go by himself. She didn't want to let him go.

And they didn't want her. And they didn't want to take her. And she wouldn't let loose. So they said, OK, she'll go. My father didn't stop talking to her that she should go back.

And when they were almost-- where they were the night before, she started to not feel so good because she knew exactly where they were going. So my father says to the guy, she would like to go home, to go back. And they said, no, it's too late. And they wouldn't let her. And just before they came to the place, a man in a gray suit-- that's all my father could remember. He couldn't remember a name or anything.

It wasn't somebody he knew, no?

He only knew he had a gray suit on. He said, he doesn't belong here. He goes back. And when my father came home, maybe half an hour later, the chief of police came. And he said that he'll take us out of the town. And sure enough, he came at night. And we left. From Stoenesti to Czernowitz, which was a capital-- that was Northern Bucovina, was 30 kilometers, which wasn't much. I mean, today, I couldn't make it. But those days, that wasn't much, 30 kilometers. But my grandma was old. My grandfather was no problem. I mean, he could walk better than anybody. And my father couldn't walk much.

Because of his war wounds.

Anyway, somehow, with a horse which my grandfather had, we put the grandmother and my father in that. And it was a terrible thing. My father didn't feel good. My mother went to get for him some water. And as she went to get some water, my father fell. And I started to bank on him. I guess I gave him the first massage, heart massage or whatever, on his shirt. And I said, please, talk to me. Talk to me. And he finally came to. He wasn't very good. But he came. And my mother came. And we made it to Czernowitz. When we were in Czernowitz, it didn't take long and we were in the ghetto. And the ghetto was a life in itself.

Tell us about that, Erika. Now, you've been forced to move into a ghetto.

Yeah.

Tell us what the ghetto is like and what conditions were like for your family.

The ghetto was really a place nobody should ever have to be. I don't know if we were 20, or 22, or 18. I don't know how many people we were in one room.

But 18 or 20 people in one room?

In one room. Yeah. You see, our ghetto-- every ghetto in Europe was different. Ours did not have a fence. It was just a lot of police. And soldiers were there, but it was not with a gate or electric gate, nothing like it. It was just [NON-ENGLISH] 7 was taken to be the ghetto. And there, when it was a big building or a small building, that what was the ghetto. Food was not enough. Our parents could go out in the morning-- my father never did, but my mother did-- and get food. There was nothing to buy. So she couldn't get nothing. We were always hungry.

Then our parents or whoever decided that we have to study. It didn't matter that we can be killed in a day, or two, or whatever. But in the Jewish religion, if you learn, then everything will be all right. I guess that's what they [AUDIO OUT]. So we started to have lectures. People like my father-- we had there students from the university. We had there teachers and professors. And everybody was teaching. My father was teaching too. He was teaching the French Revolution. He gave us everything about Napoleon and his wife, Josephine.

And this is in the ghetto when you're--

In the ghetto.

--living in these very harsh conditions?

Yeah. And I remember, I really couldn't care less what happened to Napoleon or Josephine. If they ended up in Helena or wherever they ended up, didn't bother me at all. And when my father asked me a question, I didn't have an answer because I never listened. And it happened about three times that he asked me and I had no answer.

So then he wanted to be with me alone. But to have any privacy in that place wasn't possible. He had me in a corner. And he says, you hurt me very much. And that really bothered me because I never wanted to hurt them. I hurt them because of my behavior. But I didn't mean to do it. It just did it by itself. I didn't really do things.

But yet your father-- it was still important to him that he--

That I didn't listen.

And that you learned, that you're still getting schooling--

Yeah, that's right.

--in those circumstances.

The schooling was the most important thing. It didn't matter that you died. That was part of the game. Was no problem about that. I said, how did I-- why did I hurt you? He says, you never had an answer. I said, I can't. I'm hungry. He said, what do you think the rest of the kids are? I said, I think not as hungry as I am. And my father was really very upset. And it upset me that I hurt him because I didn't mean to. So what I did was-- you saw the picture what I got with the yellow star. That was a little picture. It wasn't this big.

Right. Your identification card.

My identification card. We always had to have it on us. I left it there. And I also had the star, which I wore on my coat. I took that off, left it there too. And I went out. You see, my father had a friend who was a priest. And there was a store where they sold only for priests and nuns. And I went out. I went there. And I bought whatever I could. And when it came to paying, I gave the name of the priest. I remember, I said, Father So-and-so is going to pay. I didn't even know if he the father or not the father. But that what I said. And no problem. They gave me the food. And I left.

When I came to the ghetto, nobody stopped me going or coming. You see, the real reason they didn't stop me was I had blonde hair. That's colored. That's not good. It needs already new coloring. But I have blue eyes. And I speak German fluently. So I had no problems going out. Nobody stopped me. Nobody stopped me coming back, either.

But my mother fainted when she saw me because she never believed she will ever see me again. And my father took me in the corner and said, how could you have done that? He says, don't you remember? The chief of police took us out from there. Now, if he would have been caught, he would have been killed. Do you want that my friend should get killed too? I said, no, but what should I have done?

He said, I don't want you ever to do that again. But just in case it should come to you that you have to go out, you go first to the priest and you tell him what you did. And that happened. It came to me that I had to go out again. And I went out. And I went to the priest. And I told him. And he told me that I can do it as much as I want. But I have to be very--