

Therefore, I shouldn't get caught. And I went out already for months at that time. And once when I came out of the ghetto, there was a German soldier with a lot of medals with crutches. And he stood on one. And with the other crutch he was hitting a man.

And I don't know what got into me. But I couldn't see him just hitting the man. The man never did anything. So I went over and in my perfect German I told him that it's wrong. I actually gave him one of the lectures my father gave me so many. So I used one. And people were listening. It was a very good lecture.

So here's this little girl lecturing this German soldier.

That's right. And after I finished my lecture, before I even realized what's happening, I felt the hand on my arm. And he said, we'll go home now, little girl. That'll be enough.

And I looked. And it was a policeman. I knew I couldn't go home. You know, when anything happens, when anybody did something wrong, they usually killed him and his family. And then you never knew, for good measure they took 10, 20 people, whatever they felt like or whoever did it felt like, that's how many they took. I couldn't go home.

But I knew that in our neighborhood where the ghetto was there was a singer, a full opera singer that she lived there. So I went there. And I rang the bell.

You didn't know her. You just knew that she live there.

I never saw her. I never saw her. But I rang the bell. And before the door opens, I says mama-- I didn't know if she's a mama or not a mama, but I called her mama.

And the policeman said, is that your daughter, Madame? She didn't pay attention to the policeman at all. She just told me with a finger, I told you once, I told you twice, home and homework.

And the policeman in the meantime kept saying, is that your daughter? Is that your daughter? She doesn't pay attention.

But after she repeated it about two or three times, then she felt maybe it's not right to do that. And she started the next best thing, which was also very legal. And she started to hit me, right and left. My face got so red I could feel it. And I didn't care anymore what happened.

And like in a dream, I heard the policemen say to her, stop hitting. Her take her in. Don't hit her anymore.

And she took me in. She never said a word to the policeman, took me in. And he left. And she said, where are you from, the ghetto? I said, yes.

So she was very nice to me. And she let me go home. She did not offer that she will keep me or anything. But she saved my life anyway. I mean, if she wouldn't have done what she did.

So you had the presence of mind to think, to go there, and pretend that was your home. And for her to have the presence of mind to go along with it.

Yeah, to go along with it. And when she hit me, she hit me so hard. And for years I really never even saw the why it was so hard. Because I think she was just as scared as I was because she really didn't pay attention to the policeman. She never knew what was going on.

Eventually, Erika, of course, your parents reached the conclusion, they made the decision that they wanted to save you and your sister.

That was after-- but that was after we were taken to go to concentration camp because nobody stayed in the ghetto

forever. The ghetto was usually the place where you stayed until they take you into the concentration camp. And our turn came too.

And when we were staying-- when we were taken to go to the concentration camp, it was on a place where they play ball or whatever, a big, big place.

Like a stadium or--

Stadium, yeah. And my father thought he saw somebody and he waved. And the soldier knocked him down. He didn't take much to knock him down. And he started to hit him.

And I just couldn't see anybody hitting my father. And I threw myself on top of my father. And he didn't stop. He just kept hitting my back.

The soldier?

The soldier. And I can tell you I have really a lot of problems with my back. But I wouldn't have it operated. But that's besides the point.

I think my father fainted because I was dead weight. And I fainted too. And the next thing I remember that I woke up in the ghetto.

And in the ghetto when I woke up, I thought that somebody was trying to really kill me. I didn't know. They had something in my mouth. Nobody was trying to kill me. It was just that the back was wrong something. And they had a doctor there. He didn't have no medication. And they were trying to put it together, to pull it back.

And they didn't want me to scream. So they put a piece of whatever in my mouth. And they held it in that way. I thought that somebody was trying to hurt me. Nobody was trying to hurt me.

So somehow miraculously, your father and you were able to leave the stadium--

No, we weren't the only ones who were left.

Got sent back to the ghetto?

Because they didn't have enough of the wagons. That's why. Not because my father was hurt. I mean, that wasn't the reason. And so that's what happened to us.

So it's at that point, Erika, that your parents then decide--

Yeah.

--they've got to save you and your sister.

Yeah. And probably, my mother went out at night. Because my mother after I went out a lot, my mother-- that was also when we were in the ghetto, my grandparents got sick. And my mother wanted to get them some food. And she said to me once, we will go out together to a little village, and we'll try to get some food.

And we did get food. My mother gave the guy the [? coat. ?] And she told him, you kill it and clean it for it. And he did it. And when we came home, we didn't have-- where was just a primus, you know what you use in the lab. And my mother made a chicken broth and gave it to my grandmother.

And she said, where did you get chicken? She said, I bought it. She says, who killed the chicken? Because in the Jewish religion there is a shochet who kills the chicken. And my mother said, the shochet.

And I said, how can mother lie? I was told if I lie, I get double punishment. That's why I always told the truth. Really, I wouldn't have told the truth, but I had no choice. And my mother lies.

And my father, he took one look at me. And he saw probably in my eyes whatever that I-- and he took me aside. And he says, you have a problem. I said mother lied. He said mother didn't lie. Mother wanted that grandma should eat it. And she wouldn't have eaten it if she would have told her the guy killed the chicken. So she told her a lie. But she said, if God is in heaven, then he'll know she didn't die-- that she didn't lie to lie. She just was trying to save her life.

My mother was quite a lady too. She really was. She really didn't know how to cook, but when it came to that time, she knew how to cook.

And she also was really crucial to helping get the identities for you.

Oh, absolutely. She went out at night, and she--

Also taking off her star and slipping out of the ghetto.

Oh, yeah. My mother was really blonde. You know, I had a little reddish hair, but also in more in the blonde, blue eyes. And she was from Vienna. She spoke-- I mean at home we spoke German. She was a very nice lady.

Do you know how they reached the decision and how they obtained the identification cards and the identity for you as Christians?

I don't know exactly how because they didn't tell us. Just one day, my father gave both of us a lecture about that they obtained, which we knew from the friend, papers that we are actually Greek Orthodox and that we can live, you know. But we have to leave there.

And my father insisted that we have to be extremely, extremely respectful to any religion we come across, to any, because we are taking a religion which is not ours. And if we really save our life, we have to be very religious-- I mean very good to any religion we come across. And I think I really did that. I am very--

So, Erika, you now have these identities as Greek Orthodox, you and your sister. And you have to say goodbye to your parents and leave.

Yeah.

What did you do?

We left. And we didn't go the right way. We didn't know our geography very well. We ended up in Russia, in Kyiv. And there my sister was old enough she could go to work. And she found was a lady who had two daughters also. She found a corner.

She asked for a room. She said, I don't have a room, but I have a corner. This corner a lady has. And you can have this corner.

And we slept in this corner about two, three weeks. And then one day she said she needs the corners. And we had to leave, and the lady had to leave. We called her the Old Lady. We didn't know her name. We called her the Old Lady.

It came out she was also from Czechoslovakia. And she lost her husband. And she had two sons. And she was hoping that she will find them somewhere in the army because in 1942, the Czech government, which was in London during the war, had in 1942 put together a battalion of Czech soldiers.

My late husband was in Siberia. And he was taken out and sent to Moscow. And he became an officer--

In the Czech brigade?

Czech brigade. And she was hoping-- that's ahead of-- I'm going ahead of me-- but she was hoping that she will find her sons. We couldn't find a place in Kyiv anymore. We found it in Katerynivka. Katerynivka was like here you have Potomac and Rockville and whatever. And it was Rockville.

Like a suburb of Kyiv.

Suburb, yes. So we were there. We were at the lady--

And she went with you, the lady you called the Old Lady?

Yeah, she went with us.

OK.

And we found the lady who was also a Czech in Russia. And she had sauerkraut she gave us. She said it's very healthy. For years I never ate sauerkraut because I thought I was so healthy. I ate all the sauerkraut.

But anyway, we were there. And then I went to school. My sister insisted that I go to school. And she worked.

And there I met a nurse. And she was young. And she lived also in Katerynivka. That's how we actually met that we came out from the hospital the same time. Because if you went to school, you had to work too.

We had a lot of problems in Kyiv. One time, we walked out, my sister and I. And when the war started, I wore white knee socks-- and, of course, there was no pants. Nobody wore pants-- and a skirt, and I had a blue coat. And when we were alone we spoke German to each other.

And a Russian officer from the police heard us. And he took us in. And as we were walking to the police--

Because he heard you talking in German?

German, yeah.

OK.

So my sister says, when you come there, you tell him the truth, the truth only. I said, how can I tell him the truth? All I have is a cross and the paper. How can I tell him? She says, the truth only. And she didn't say no more.

So I told him the truth. He didn't say nothing. And he put me back in jail.

When I came down to the jail, my sister said, I forgot to tell you I have a razor blade in my shoe. I'm going cut my veins, and you'll cut yours. I said, I'm not going to cut mine. I said, you have to call me another day. Today is not my day.

She said, I am very serious. I said, I'm serious too. I said, but remember, you said to mother that you'll take care of me. You go and do it, and I will be all by my little self.

And in that moment, the guy came down. And he turns to me. And he says, so how did you at Easter? I said, I never celebrated Easter. I don't know about Easter. He said, what did you celebrate? I said, Passover. I said, and in Passover, if you are the youngest, you ask the four questions. And I was the youngest.

And I asked, [NON-ENGLISH], which is the first question. I never remember the second. But he didn't wait for the

second. That was my luck. And he took us out. And when he let us go, he said, for your information, I'm Jewish too, but don't tell anybody. We didn't even know his name. If he would have wanted to see him, we couldn't even have seen him. That was--

We had a lot of problems. We went also for-- my sister would go for potatoes. She would get two potatoes. Every time we went somewhere, we left and we were like maybe half a mile away or whatever, and the bomb exploded every time.

And then my sister would wash the potato, and she would say, eat it. I said, I don't really like it. She says, you don't like pears? I said, that's not a pear. She said, when did you have a pear? I said, I don't remember, but I remember better. She said, that's a pear eat it. So I ate it. I didn't want to eat anything--

Erika, at some point, of course, you then had to flee Kyiv.

Yes.

And tell us about that.

The girl I told you about, she was a nice girl.

The nurse?

The nurse. She was young. She was really a student too. And she was asking me to go with her. At that time, I was already 15, going on 16. She says, we have to meet some boys. I thought it will be great. I never met a boy. It would be nice if I would meet a boy.

But I knew if I tell my sister that I want to meet boys, I would never even dare do it. So I told her that when I come home, I have a lot of chores to do. And I can't. I can't do it.

And then on December 24-- it was 1944-- I was in her house. And she says, we are going go and meet nice boys. I said, really? How are we going to do that? She says, you know you have this girl who lives with you the, German spy? I said, which is the German spy? She says, the blonde one.

My sister was very blonde. I mean she was blonde as blonde can be. She said she and then the old lady. She said right after the holidays, the NKVD, which was the secret police for the Russians, are going to come and take care of them. And--

So she didn't know this was your sister?

I never ever spoke about the sister and mother and brother. Nothing. I never told anybody who she is or what she is. Never.

And you know, when we were younger, we really didn't look much alike. I think now we look more alike. I don't know. But I don't think we looked very much alike.

So she's given you-- let you in on this secret that--

That's what she told me. So I just stayed there like I always did. I didn't go home early. And when I came home, I told it to my sister and to the lady. And the lady said, we have to run right now. It was evening. It was maybe 9 o'clock. And we went.

And there was in that place, Katerynivka, which was where we stayed, and in Katerynivka was a forest. And as we walk, we hear a man's voice, do you know the secret word or whatever--

Password.

Password. I couldn't-- I mean, I didn't know nothing. The lady says, three ladies running. When she said it in her voice, not a Russian accent, a light from a light came on to the lady who spoke. And it got very quiet for a very short time.

And then he put the light on him. That was the lady's son.

That was her son in the woods?

Her son, yeah. So it was a reunion. And also he said, I'm going go and ask the officers if we can take you. He came back, and he said he can't take us because it's against the rule to take civilian people into tanks.

So we knew we had to leave. We didn't know what we were going to do. And then about two hours later, he came. And he said, two of my friends are going to take the girls, and I will take you. And that's what happened.

And then he said to his mother, when we will leave you out, wherever we leave you, you go where your nose takes you straight ahead and go to the first house. And that's exactly what we did.

And they took you in tanks, is that right?

Yeah, they took us in the tanks. It was not very comfortable. But, yeah, they took us in the tanks. Each one had a tank. I said, we won the war because we were in the tanks. We really helped them win the war.

And when we came there, the lady said she's a wife of an officer with her daughters. We didn't look anything like her, but we could have been like the father. And she said, you go upstairs. I have upstairs is a room.

So we walked up the steps. And it was so cold. It was January 1 or 2, whatever. We didn't even take our clothes-- the coat off or anything. And my sister comes in and she says we have to run. I said, what are you talking about?

The lady starts talking now. I want to tell you something. She says, I can't run anymore. You go.

My sister doesn't pay attention. She goes, opens the window. It was like not quite the second floor. You know, I mean it was really high. And she opened the window. And she says, throw her out the window.

I never threw anybody out. And my sister tell me to do it. So when my sister jumped, I went and I said, would you like to come to the window. She says, no. I said, you see that? You want that in your mouth? She said, no. So I shoved her through the window, and I threw her out.

When I looked down, my sister was very skinny. She's much skinnier and shorter than I am. And she stood there with her arms out. And she--

She caught her?

She didn't catch her, but she broke her and nothing happened to her. And I was looking, nobody was standing there holding the arms for me. [LAUGHTER] So I jumped like my sister did. And then we took--

Erika, why did your sister say you had to leave there immediately?

Yes, because she heard the lady-- you see Polish and Czech are Slavic languages. Like Russian is also a Slavic language. You don't have to speak the language to understand. It's not that you understand everything, but almost everything.

But enough?

Yeah. And she understood that the lady had said she has here three Jews. If you want, you can have them. So she knew

who she was talking about. She wasn't talking about herself.

Right.

So that's why she wanted us to--

So you jumped out the window. And then where do you go?

And then we saw a truck, you know. And we went on the truck. And we finally made it to Snina. Snina was in Slovakia. You know, it was Czechoslovakia when I was around. And we came there. And there were Czech soldiers, a lot. And they were very happy to see us.

And there was also a priest, you know. And he came too. In the evening, they made a dinner. And my sister always reminds me that I had forgotten the Czech-- I mean I knew it, but not very well. And he asked me, if my sister is married. I said, yes, she has me. You know, I didn't realize what he was talking about.

But anyway, they took the lady in the army. She was not an old lady. She was about 37, 38. I don't know how old. And my sister could have gone in the army too. But I couldn't have because I wasn't old enough. And we wouldn't separate really. My sister wouldn't leave me.

Or they could have sent me to Russia because there they had a children's home for children from Czech, you know. Czech children, they could send to Russia. I wouldn't have gone to Russia. And so my sister didn't go.

And then one day, the army left. And we stayed with a peasant there. And when my sister didn't want to go to the army, so the officer said, so maybe she would get married. And one officer wanted to adopt me. He was older and he lost a son, I think, or whatever.

But I didn't want to be adopted. I didn't know if my parents are alive or not. I had no idea. But I didn't want to.

So one day an officer came to our house, very nice officer. And he looked at my sister. And he says, you are so beautiful. He said, I will marry you, and you will not have to worry anymore about food or anything.

And my smart sister says, I don't want to get married. I don't know you. I can't cook. And I really don't want to get married.

So he left. What could he have done? When he came back, his friend asked him, how are the girls you met? He said, one is beautiful. He said, I would like to marry her. The other one is not worth mentioning. [LAUGHTER] That was me. [LAUGHTER] But in the end, he married me.

In the end, he married you.

Yeah. [LAUGHTER] Yeah.

Erika, I'm going to stop us for a moment because we're starting to close in. And there's a couple of other things that I certainly want to be sure that we talk about before we end and maybe have a couple of moments for our audience. For all practical purposes at this point, you've been liberated and the war's over for you.

Yeah, and then we found our parents.

Tell us about finding your parents. Here are you and your sister have survived. And now these Russian-- or Czech officers want to marry you and--

No, my sister was already married.

She was married by this time.

She married him. We had another thing where we came across Russian officers, which he was almost killed. And then she looked for that officer. He was fighting somewhere. And on May the 9th was the end of the war for us.

And that officer who my brother-in-law said, the other one is not worthwhile, that was me. And he went to his town to Ostrava, and he found out that his mother and sister were killed in Auschwitz. And he was very, very upset.

And in June, before my birthday, he said, if I would marry him. I didn't know what marriage really was all about, that you have to love, or whatever. And I said, why not? What else would I have done? I thought it was-- I didn't go to school yet or anything. And so I said, yes.

And in the meantime, we were trying to find our parents. And we found our parents. And when we found our parents, we had a very, very bad thing with my father. We didn't speak German to my mother. And that was really very bad because my mother didn't speak very well Romanian or Czech. And the other languages, she spoke, we didn't. So my father had a big lecture for both of us--