

Welcome you to today's First Person. My name is Dr. Will Meinecke. I'm a historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in the Division of Education. The 2005 First Person series has been made possible by generous support from the Louis and Doris Smith foundation. I think there's a member of the family here. Mr. Louis Smith, if you'd please stand, I'd like to thank you and acknowledge the support of the foundation.

[APPLAUSE]

OK, let me remind you that the Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World War II. It's important because I think today's story is primarily about the collaborators. Remember 6 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust but also the millions of others who were targeted for national, ethnic or racial reasons.

Today, we are honored to have as our guest Erika Neuman Eckstut, a survivor from Czechoslovakia. Erika was born on June 12, 1928. She was just five years old when Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 and just 11 when World War II started in 1939.

Just so that you get a sense of it, the map of Europe is very different, very changed from 1933. And Czechoslovakia is indicated. And she was born in a small town near the Austrian border called Znojmo.

She was born, as I said, 1930-- I'm sorry, in 1931, she moved with her family to Romania. It's a very interesting story. And to be sure, she moved to a very small town in Bukovina, which is not really that far from where she was born, but right about there before the Prut River. It was a town called Stoenesti. Erika went to public school in Stoenesti, but also to Hebrew school, which her father helped found.

Here is Erika's family, her mother, Dolly, her father, Ephram, and her sister, Beatrice. Her father was a lawyer and later became mayor of the town of Stoenesti in Romania. Her mother also very educated, had a degree in business, and worked at a bank before the birth of Erika and her sister.

Life was happy there until 1940 when the Soviet Union annexed northern Bukovina, along with other territories in Eastern Europe, including the town of Stoenesti, where Erika lived with her family. A little over a year after the annexation, the Germans and Romanians attacked the Soviet Union, invading the Soviet Union, and reconquered that territory. Romanians charged that the local Jews had been pro-Soviet and began killing them indiscriminately. Erika narrowly survived and was forced into the ghetto of Czernowitz in northern Bukovina, as you can see.

This is Erika's identification card from the ghetto. Living conditions in the ghetto were terrible. And they faced constant fear of deportation to Transnistria, a killing area in Romanian occupied Ukraine. Here's a portrait of Erika in the ghetto. And I find this fascinating. Here's a portrait of her in a play in the ghetto, taking part in a play, again, just to keep her spirits up and to try to make life bearable in the impossible situation of the ghetto.

In 1943, Erika's father arranged for Erika and her sister, Beatrice, to escape the ghetto on false papers. They posed as non-Jews. She went to the Ukraine in the Soviet Union after the Germans had been repulsed from the city. So it's now liberated territory in the Soviet Union.

After the war, they made their way, Beatrice and Erika, back to Czechoslovakia, where they were reunited with her parents, who also survived. Now along the way, Erika met a young Czech Jewish soldier named Robert Kauder. She married him. And had two children. Please join me in welcoming Erika Eckstut, Erika Neuman Eckstut, and today's program.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. Thank you. OK. Can you hear me? OK.

And myself, can you hear me? So yours is really an international story. How many languages did you speak growing

up?

Three. I spoke German the best. And then I spoke Czech. I didn't really speak very well because I was two when we left Czechoslovakia. And then I learned Romanian. And then in 1940, I learned Russian.

But you were in Czechoslovakia. Why did you speak German the best?

Because it was my mother's tongue. My mother was from Vienna. And she taught my sister and me German. And she taught us to speak, to write, and also to read. And we were not supposed to speak anything else but German so we don't have an accent in it.

And she was always not very happy with me because my German was very hard. And the Viennese spoke a softer German. So she wasn't very happy with my German. But that was the reason that we spoke German the best because it was our mother's tongue.

And Romanian I had no problem to learn either. I came there when I was two. And my grandparents, we had our grandparents there. And the reason we came from Czechoslovakia to Romania was because my father was the only living son in Europe for my grandparents.

And he was also a Zionist, and he wanted to go to Palestine. And he wanted to take his parents along with him when we got there. My grandfather had a farm, a little half farm, not a big one. He had a horse, a cow, and some chickens. I don't know how many he had.

In Stoenesti?

In Stoenesti, yeah. And my grandfather said, if you can find somebody to take my horse, my cow, and the chicken, I would go. But if you don't find somebody, I don't go nowhere.

And so my father-- I don't for-- just a short while, not open an office, I guess. It was a small town. But he became the mayor of the town. And we then lived in the house, which was the mayor's house, not our house. And--

So your earliest memory is of Romania not from Czechoslovakia?

Romania. No, not of-- I mean I said I remember this or that. But that was all I think what I just whatever I heard them talking I remembered. But I really didn't. It was just made up, you know.

So this is Romania in the 1930.

Yeah.

Did you experience any antisemitism?

No, I didn't really experience any antisemitism. And I don't know if it's not from the fact that, first of all, my father had a big job there. And also, you see, in our town where a lot of Romanian, not a lot, but there were Romanians and they were also a lot of Ukrainian people there.

And they used to invite me to come and eat. And I had a very good appetite. I still do. And whenever they invited me to come and eat, I always went. And I think they liked that very much.

My mother didn't like it. And neither did my father. But they liked it. And I never heard anybody call me a Jew or anything. I never really knew that it was. If somebody had anything, I really didn't. And really I thought I had the best childhood any child could have.

And when you went to school, it was public school?

Public school. I went to Romanian public school. And then my father also started the Hebrew school. And the Hebrew school, we had every year a show when the school ended. And you were either in a play or learned a poem.

And I had to learn a poem. And my father was the one who taught me. I mean he made sure that I learned it well because my father originally studied to be a rabbi. But he really loved the law so much. And the rabbi who taught him helped him to go to law school because his father was very much against it. And so he became a lawyer, but originally-- so he knew Hebrew very well. And I learned really the poem terrific.

And my grandfather was also-- he could do everything. He did everything in the farm. And he also made-- he had in the garden cherries, sour cherries, delicious. I never saw them here, the sour cherries. They were so good.

And he would give me a little bowl of those cherries. But he made from the cherries wine. And the cherries I got were really alcohol, with alcohol. But I didn't know that. I just knew I liked the cherries very much.

And when I had from the Hebrew school my grandfather was not very happy with my poem because I had a lot of time to spend with my father to learn the poem. And before I went to say my poem, my grandfather said, why don't you come over for a while? So I came over. And he gave me a little bowl of cherries. And I ate them. And I became very happy.

And when I told the poem, I told the first four lines. Then I said the last. Then I started again from the beginning because I don't think many people spoke Hebrew. And then finally, I started in the beginning and I said it very well. I got a lot of applause. They were very happy with me.

And when I came down from the podium, my father stood there. And he said, breathe on me. And I breathed. And before anything could happen, I heard my grandfather, if you want to talk, I'm here. And they didn't talk for a week. It was a very big problem.

I had another problem with my grandfather. I didn't have a problem with him because I loved him. Whatever he said was for me the law. But my not with my father. He did not believe the way my grandfather was teaching me.

He said, if you go somewhere and somebody should hit you or so, you give him back double. My father said, you never do that. You talk to the kid, but you never hit. I liked my grandfather's idea much better.

Yeah?

Yeah. And I usually would give twice, three times just to make sure that I did it right. And my father would have after a lecture for me. And he took usually an hour to give me a lecture. That was really terrible. Because for me to take away an hour, I could have played. I could have done so many things. And I had to sit and listen to my father giving me the lecture that I was so wrong. And I adored my grandfather.

Then we had to learn to read. I did. My sister didn't. She was five years old when she read. I was at that time already six. And I didn't really read so well like my sister.

And my grandfather, I would sit on one side. She would sit on the other. And when she had her head down at the book, my grandfather stood on her side and winked. And I went. And just--

You went--

I went with my grandfather.

Oh, I see.

I left the book and all.

So the wink was a signal for you to sneak away.

To sneak away. So she never even paid attention that I left. She didn't know nothing. And so I went with my grandfather. And I had a great time.

Then one day, I saw that our principal from school came. I had just finished the first grade. And I wasn't very happy when I saw him.

And the girl who was with us, I told her that I'm leaving. She says, I saw-- he came to Father's office. I said, yeah. I said, I'm leaving. And she said, you make sure you are home by dinner time. I said, OK.

And I came home at dinner. And we had dinner. And after dinner, my father said, bring the book. So I brought the book.

We didn't have the second grade, still the first grade. So I brought it. My father opened it. He said, read it. And I read it beautiful, no problem.

He closed the book again. He opened it. And I read beautiful. He said, he doesn't know what's wrong with the principal. The principal, something wrong with him.

He closed the book again. And then he put his hand on the picture. And I was dead. I couldn't read. I couldn't read a word.

So then my father took somebody, and I learned to read. And I made it up. I really liked to read after very much. Once I learned how. Once I learned how to read, I really read a lot. I still read. But I couldn't read when I finished the first grade. And I had all excellent when I finished the first grade. Nothing else, but excellent.

And I had really a wonderful, wonderful time with my grandparents and with my aunt. And I just had a great time. And my sister, she was older than me. And at that time, the age difference played a big role.

When I was 6 and she was 11, she felt she's already a lady and I was still a baby. And she had a girlfriend who was red. My sister was blonde, blonde as blonde can be. I was also blonde, but I had a reddish color. And she had a girlfriend who was really red, red hair. And I didn't like her. And she brought her once home. And I don't know why, I bit her.

You bit her?

Bit her. I bit her. Maybe it's a sign here that wasn't nice. But I wasn't a nice kid. My sister when she was born, she was--

So your lectured a lot by your father?

You know, I got lectures by my father. Not my sister. But I got--

Did he give you the no biting lecture?

Oh, boy, did I get for the biting. I didn't like her. She was red. And I didn't like redheads. So I was alone a little reddish, but I didn't like it on anybody else. And I bit her.

Then when my sister would come home in the afternoon and she would say, where is mother, I said mother was looking for you. My mother wasn't looking for her. She was playing bridge. But I told her that she was looking for her.

And she went to my mother. She knew where she was. And my mother says, I didn't look for you. And I did that to her I don't know how many times.

And my mother used to tell her, why do you listen to her? She's just doing it to teach you to. She says, but what if you really look for me? She believed that I'm really going to be honest and tell it only when it's true.

Just in case.

Just in case she wouldn't she would never not do it. When we had dinner and whatever I wanted I could have had more, there was no problem. But when my sister took something, I just saw a fly. And she landed-- my mother said, aren't you going to eat? She said, Erika saw a fly. She says, do you see a fly here? She said, no, but Erika saw it. And she wouldn't eat anymore. And my mother used to get very mad at me.

But then once she was reading. I wasn't reading. And I wanted her to play with me. But she wouldn't play with me. That was a difference. When it was a difference was big. It was very bad for me.

So we were in the bedroom I was my-- and I don't know why I wanted my sister so much to play with me, but she wouldn't play with me. And I jumped or whatever I did. And my sister said, stop doing it. She went like that on me. Stop doing that.

And I started to cry bitter tears and so loud everybody could hear me. And my mother came. And she says, how could you do it to the baby?

Now, I have to ask, were these real tears or--

I don't know if they were real tears, but I yelled bloody murder. I was really very bad. When I grew up, it was almost already after the war, I apologized to my sister. I still apologize. She says she loves me always. She's a good girl. She really always was. She's a good girl.

Your father, he was mayor of the town.

Yeah.

So he must have understood the big political changes that were happening. Did you get a sense of--

I didn't have really any sense. I had this sense to tease my sister as best as I could. Whatever I could figure out I did. But I really and truly didn't know. In 1937, when the Iron Guard came to Romania, I realized because I heard my parents talk that it's not good. They want the Jews out, and they wanted my father out of the office.

And they said that he carries in his case, in his briefcase, that he carries a gun, which wasn't true. And one day, I remember-- I don't know how I was home alone. I guess my sister was at school or whatever. I don't know. Excuse me.

My father walked in and said, go under the bed and don't move until you hear Mother. I didn't know why do I have to go under the bed. But I did go under the bed. When Father said, I went right away under the bed. And I didn't go out until I heard Mother.

And when I came out, my father wasn't home. And it was a very big deal going on. And then there was the court-- no lawyer would take my father's case. And he didn't want anybody. He wanted to be his own lawyer. And he was.

So he was arrested?

He was arrested. But he was his own lawyer. And he won the case, which was the biggest thing. And my father had written down every single word, everything what went on. And then he sent it to America to his brother. When my sister came to America, she wanted the papers. And my uncle gave it to some friend he had and forgot who he gave it to. And we never got it back. It was really an excellent book. But my uncle gave it--

Do you know what the charges were, why he was arrested or what they said?

Yeah. He wasn't-- he was arrested for a few hours or whatever because he didn't have the gun.

Oh.

He didn't have the gun.

They had heard rumors that he had had a gun in his briefcase.

That he had a gun in his brief-- he never had a gun, never. But--

So when did you realize that something was terribly wrong?

When I was under the bed and then when I saw that my father wasn't home just for a few hours. And then he came home. And then when the court case went on. But at that time I was really too little to understand what was going on. I only heard that the Iron Guard is here and they don't like the Jews. And it wasn't really very good at all.

And then in 1940, when the Russians came, that I already understood more. And it wasn't good at all. And--

So what changes did you notice?

The changes in the school alone. You know, I mean that was-- we were in the school regular. All of a sudden, there was a girl I have never seen. And she was a Polish girl, I understood afterwards.

And when we had whatever lecture we were having and somebody walked in, and as soon as he walked in, she went to the window and she jumped out. And she got hurt. And I don't know what happened. But it was very bad under the Russians, really bad.

You had it so that you really and truly wouldn't talk much. You know, everybody was very quiet . And you just did your homework, whatever you had. And you didn't talk or anything. And then one day, they left. It was a year later.

And the Germans and Romanians attacked?

We got attacked not from the Germans or Romanians. We got attacked from the people in the town.

Oh, explain.

Pardon me?

Oh, please do explain.

Yeah. In the town, there lived a lot of Romanians and a lot of Ukrainian people. And the Ukrainian people didn't like the Jews at all. And they weren't good to the Jews at all.

And the people who came to our house were not from the town, because my father knew every single person in the town. And when we came there, my father saw some people he knew from our neighbors. And I remember when we stood there-- there were about 500 Jews in this small town.

When we came there was in the middle was a rabbi and his two sons. And they were killed in front of us. And there were more children than I, my age, younger and older. And everybody cried. And people were saying prayers.

And I felt if I will ask my father, my father was so smart, he'll tell me why we have to die. And I asked my father, why I have to die, I haven't lived yet. And my father didn't really have an answer for me. He just said, please don't cry.

And it was really very hard not to cry because if you wanted or you didn't want, the tears just came down. And that was the worst thing I have ever experienced in my whole entire life because that wasn't the only thing I experienced, but that

was really terrible.

Because it was unexpected.

Completely unexpected, completely unexpected. And they killed so many men. And then all of a sudden, they didn't have ammunition. Because the one man which happened to be was an uncle of mine, and they didn't kill him with the one shot they had. And so they killed him by hitting him. And they killed him.

And then, they put us in the house, in the townhouse. It was a big, big place. And we all went there. And when my father went, he didn't walk in. And he was a smoker. And he took a cigarette and smoked right next to the door.

And a man from our town came over to my father. And he said, I'll take you home. And my father said, I'm not going anywhere. He says, I'll take your whole family and your parents too.

And so we all went home. But we didn't find really the house the way they left it. My father had beautiful books. And they were all in leather bound. Everything was on the floor open. The whole house wasn't the house we left. It was terrible the way we found it.

And somehow I must have fallen asleep because I remember my grandmother and I, we started to cry so hard. And then I probably fell asleep. When I woke up, there were two men in the house. And they wanted my father, not my grandfather, just my father.

And my father was going with them. But my sister insisted she wants to go too. And my father didn't want to take her. But she wouldn't let go. And the man said, let her come with us.

And so she went with them. When she realized that they went the same way they went the night before, she started to be not very well. She didn't feel good. And my father said to the man, she wants to go home. They said, no, it's too late. And they wouldn't let her go home.

So your sister recognized that they were going to kill you?

Yeah, oh, absolutely. But she didn't feel good about it. And when they came almost where they were the night before, a man in a gray suit came. And he said, this man doesn't belong here. He goes home.

And so they turned around and came home. When they came home, maybe a half an hour, I don't know, a half an hour, an hour later, the chief of police came to our house. We didn't see any police or anything--

The same police chief when your father was mayor?

Yeah. Yeah. But we didn't see anybody, no soldier, no nothing. I mean that just happened the night before. You know I mean, we didn't know what was going to happen. It was a most horrible night I have ever, ever had. And he said he's going to take us out of here.

And my father said, how are you going to do it? He said, your father should give-- they had a little like carriage, like two people could sit there. He should take the horse and put there and you, my father and his mother will go in there, and we all will walk. And that's exactly what he did. And we walked.

Then my father didn't feel so good. And my mother said-- we were in a little like woods we were. My mother said she's going get some water, we should wait there. As soon as my mother left, my father keeled over. And my grandparents started-- and my sister went with my mother. And they both started to cry.

And I started to beat on my father. Please talk to me, talk to me. And he came to. But he didn't talk. He just made that he's all right, he's all right. Then my mother came, and we made it to Czernowitz.

You see, it wasn't far from where we were to go to Czernowitz. It was 15 kilometers to go there. But my grandmother couldn't walk. My father couldn't walk. So it became--

Took quite a while.

--a big tour, but we made it. When we came to Czernowitz, there was a ghetto. And the ghetto was in one part of Czernowitz. It was Czernowitz 7. It was in the seventh district. There were no nothing, just a big building was all for the Jews, not one, a few. And there was a lot of police and also soldiers were there.

When we came-- I really never know how many people because I never counted. I don't know if they were 16 or 20 people. I don't know. Maybe 18. I don't know.

And there was no food. And the adults could go out from 7:00 to 8:00 in the morning and buy food. But there was very hard to get anything. My mother, when she came home with one egg-- she really never was a great cook. She never really cooked much. But she made for us-- from the one egg, we all ate, including, my grandparents. And she used to go out like that.

And then in the Jewish religion it is that you always have to learn. And the children in my age didn't have any school. You know, no kids had any school. But we had to learn.

And there were students from the university. They were teachers. They were professors. They were all kind of people in the ghetto. And they all taught us. My father couldn't go out either. And he also taught us. He taught us the French Revolution.

And when I was sitting and listening to my father, I was listening, but I wasn't hearing what he said. I mean I heard something about Napoleon, Josephine, and Saint Helen, and whatever. But I really never connected it. I couldn't give him an answer.

And he asked me once or twice, whatever times he asked me a question. And I never had an answer. So one time he wanted to tell me that I hurt him.

You know there was very hard to have any kind of privacy or if you wanted to talk to someone because there were people all over. And somehow he got me in a corner. And he said that I hurt his feelings.

I said, how did I do that? And he told me that I never had the answer. I said I didn't pay attention. I said all I can think about is a big piece of bread.

He said, don't you think the rest of the children are also hungry? I said, I don't know. Maybe they're not as hungry as I am. All I can think of is food. He says, you really hurt me very much.

And I was very hurt when my father said because I was a tomboy. But I absolutely adored my, not only my father, my mother, my sister, everybody-- I mean I teased her, but I loved her. And--

So did you go out and look for food?

Yeah. I took off-- you know we wore the Star of David. And we got the-- you saw the ID, you know, I had. But it was a small ID, not as big as here, a small ID. I put it where I slept, and I walked out.

And there was a store where they sold for clergy and nuns. And I went there to buy whatever I could. And my father had a friend who was a priest. So when they told me how much it is, I said Father so-and-so is going to pay. I forgot his name. I remember only one lady who saved my life, otherwise I don't remember the name.

And when I came back, my mother fainted. She never believed she would see me again. And my father told me, don't you ever do that again. He said, you remember the policeman who took us out from Stoenesti? I said, sure, I remember



him. He said, if we would have been caught, he would have been killed too. Now you want to kill the priest too?

I said, but I didn't get caught. Nobody knows who took it. He said, if you ever feel that you have to go out, you'll go to the priest and you'll tell him what you did. And the next day, I felt I had to go. And I went to the priest and I told him.

And my father was right. He was a good man. Because he told me, you do as much as you can, but be very careful not to get caught.

And so I went home. And I went out. Every week I went out at least once. And I brought-- I didn't bring a lot of food. But I brought always some food.

And you know what was very unusual was that as hungry as I never even took a roll out, nothing. And the people, my mother and the other mother, they never took anything for themselves. They only gave it to the kids. It was really very was-- And so I--

One of your excursions, didn't you see a beating?

When I walked out a lot of times, then once when I walked out of the ghetto I saw a German soldier with a lot of medals on his chest. And he had two crutches. He stood on one. And with the other one, he was beating a man.

And I said, how can you be the man? And I gave him a lecture. You don't beat a person who doesn't beat back. It doesn't do nothing. And I gave him the lecture my father, one of the lectures he gave me. And people came around and stood and watched how I was talking.

And then all of a sudden, I felt a hand on my arm. And there was a policeman. And he said, OK, little girl, that's going to be enough. We'll go home.

I knew I couldn't go home. No way could I go home--

Because he'd find out that you were a Jew from the ghetto.

From the ghetto. If you did anything wrong, you and your family got killed. And for good measure, you never knew if they'll take 5 people, 20. You never had any idea what they are going to take and kill.

So what did you do?

You see, in the ghetto, the people who were not Jewish stayed in their homes. And I knew that there was a lady who lived in a very nice house and that she wasn't Jewish. I didn't know if she had children or not. But I went there. And I rang the bell.

And when I heard her going to the door, I said, mama. And the door opened right away. And she looked. And the policeman said, is that your daughter, Madame?

She didn't pay attention. She just to me with your finger, she said, I told you once, I told you twice, home and homework. And she repeated it.

And he didn't stop. He kept asking, is it your daughter, Madame? She didn't-- then she did the next best thing. And she started to hit me. Her hand was like a hammer. I mean when it came down, it hurt me like nobody's business.

And then like in a dream, I heard the policemen, say stop hitting her. Take her in. She will do the homework.

And she took me in and she said, are you from the ghetto? Or where are you from? I said the ghetto. She says, you'll have to go back. I said, yeah.

She did not offer me to save me. But she saved my life. If she would have said, I never saw this kid, that's all. Or she said, I don't know her, never saw her.

That would have been it.

That would have been it. But she didn't she. And I think the reason her hand was so heavy was because she was just as scared as I was. I mean she hit-- she hit with all her might too. I can't imagine otherwise why her hand was so heavy.

After such a near miss, how long was it before you went out into the city again?

I didn't go out after.

No?

No. You know, I wasn't afraid of going out because I was blonde and I had blue eyes. I speak German very, very well. I had no problem.

I spoke to the guy I spoke German too. And he was very happy with my German. He never said anything.

Did you deal a lot with Germans? Or was it mainly Romanians?

No, I didn't deal with Germans a lot. It's just that he was a German who hit the guy. And like I said, there were a lot of soldiers in our area. When I would walk out, I would hear some from a truck would call, come here, little girl. I ran so fast, as fast as I could. And--

So why were they yelling come here? Were they--

Oh, I don't know what they wanted. I never went to hear what they wanted. I just took my feet on my whatever and I ran. I never stayed to find out.

So you ran in the opposite direction?

Yeah. I never stayed to find out. I never had any--

So I'm curious. I know the Romanians had a policy of deporting Jews to Transnistria, especially from Bukovina.

Yeah.

And so how did you escape deportation?

You know that time when I had with-- and by the way, her name I remember. Her name was Mrs. Bokansha. I never forgot her name. I forgot the name of the priest. You know, I don't know his name. I really never asked my sister. She may remember it. I never asked her. But I never forgot Mrs. Bokansha. I remember her name very well.

I didn't go out after I had that with Mrs. Bokansha. I think I was maybe scared. You see, before I wasn't because I felt I'm blonde, I have blue eyes, I speak German.

What could happen?

What could happen, you know? I didn't have any documents on me. I could have said whatever I said. So I never had problems really. Nobody ever stopped me. That was my lucky thing. But I didn't go out.

And maybe two days, three days, I don't know, just after I came home a few days later, we were taken because we were in-- the ghetto was just a stepping stone until you had what to do with them. If there was room in Transnistria, we went.

I mean, constantly people went. You just didn't know when your time will come.

So whenever the Romanians could transport you, that's when you had to be transported.

Yeah. They transport. So our time came too. And we went there. And they told my mother, you put this here. You put that here. You put that here.

And I remember I went in my mother's pocketbook. And I took two little things. It was my sister's and mine-- how I found these little things, on the chain, but not as big as that. It was just a little thing. My sister had a [NON-ENGLISH]. You know, a [NON-ENGLISH].

A clay tablet?

A little tablet with four leaves.

Oh, four leaves.

Four leaves. And I had a little sunshine because my nickname was Sunshine. So I had a little sun. And my daughter has a little sun. She wears it.

And when they were looking at me and I had already braids-- they took my braids apart or so. But nobody said, you have something in your hands. I had not much, but whatever.

And in the meantime, my father thought he saw somebody. And he waved. And the soldier knocked him down and started to beat him. I couldn't see anybody beating my father. And I went on top of my father to protect him. And I got it on the back.

And to this day, I have a lot of back problems. And I really suffered with it. But my father fainted because I was dead weight on him. And I also fainted.

And the next thing I know is I woke up in the ghetto. And I couldn't understand I was there on that place. How am I ending up in the ghetto?

And there was a man standing there. And my mother explained because I had in my mouth a rag. And Mother said that the doctor was trying to put back my back. It was out. And he didn't want me to scream. So he put something in my mouth. And that other people are back here too because they didn't have enough of the carriages to transport us.

And a few days later, my mother got out at night. And she went to the priest and asked him if he could give us papers. He wanted really we should come and be converted. And my mother wasn't sure if she can do it.

So anyway, he gave her papers. And he gave her cross for me and my sister. And he told her that we have to be careful the way we cross ourselves. The Catholics across from right to left, and what we were we crossed from left to right. And we tried that because in Europe when you saw a church or a Cathedral you went by, you had to cross yourself. So we learned that.

So you were preparing to be in hiding in--

Yeah.

--plain sight?

Yeah. We had to leave the ghetto. And my father had a long talk with us. And he told us that we have to be extremely nice to people, which are other religions than we are. That we are taking care of religion, which is not ours. And if we survive, we have to be extremely nice to any religion we found and respectful and all that. And he talked to us that we

were brought up to be that way. And so we listened, and then we left. And we--

So did you stay in your house in the ghetto or did you find housing somewhere else just to--

No, no. When we had the papers, we left. My sister left first. And I left after. And I left with the train.

OK, that's when your father decided it would be better if you left Czernowitz.

Yeah. No, definitely, because I mean a lot of people knew us.

So you and your sister, he arranged for them--

And I didn't have this ID with me. I didn't have any Jewish papers on me, just the papers that I am Greek Orthodox. And I had the cross on my chest. That's all I had.

And that's how you got to Kyiv?

That's how I got to Kyiv. And when I came to Kyiv, my sister was there. And she was looking where we should stay. And she got in a house. It was a big room, not as big as that, but a big room.

And the lady said she has one corner. She says, this corner is taken, but this corner is free. You can have this corner-- not the bed, just the corner.

And my sister and I had-- and the lady which she had here was a nice lady. We called her the Old Lady. We didn't know her name. So we called her the Old Lady. She was in her 30s. I don't know if she was 37 or whatever. Now, I think she was young. But then-- then-- she was very old.

When you're in your 20s, people were who were 30--

Yeah, I wasn't in my 20s yet. I wasn't. And we stayed there about three weeks or so. Then she needed-- and you know what also was funny, we stayed there and there was no bathroom. She had no bathroom at all. And I really never brought that up. But it's a very important thing.

My sister would wash me because she would take me down. And there was a barrel of water from this-- whatever fell down, the rain

From the rainwater.

From the rain, yeah. And she would knock it because it was in the winter. And she would have some water. And she would say, get undressed. You know, I mean, at that time, I was already 14, whatever. And I didn't want to get undressed she should wash me. There was nobody there. I mean, there were just the two of us.

I said, I am not getting undressed in front of you. She says, you are getting undressed right now. Otherwise, I'll put your head in it.

And I did get undressed. And she washed me. And I used to say, I will get pneumonia and die, and mother is going to be very angry with you. But I did it anyway when she told me she's going put my hand in there. And my head, she washed with whatever she could find, petroleum, benzene, because she was afraid that I'll get lice. Everybody had lice.

I think I want to make sure that we get some questions from the audience. So if you stand up, if you have a question, and I recognize you, please stand up and say your question really loud. I'll repeat the question. And then Erika will answer. So if you have a question. No questions? Ma'am.

How did your parents get back to Czechoslovakia?

So how did your parents get back to Czechoslovakia?

That's the best question I ever had. You see, we found our parents in Bucharest. Bucharest was the capital of Romania.

And the way we found them is that I got from my uncle from America, he sent me \$25. He also sent for my sister. But she didn't get it. Mine came first. So we had an address of him. And we asked him. And he knew that my parents were in Bucharest.

When we got together with them-- and that I would like to tell you about because that I think is the most important thing from all whatever I went through what I got from my father at the end. And my late husband and my late brother-in-law, they went and they got our parents back.

When my parents came-- we were living on a mountain, on a big mountain. When I saw the car, I took three steps at once. My sister never took two steps. She took one at a time. She was very nice.

And I already had my father in my arms when my sister came. It was so beautiful when I saw my parents. I really and truly can't describe how I felt. I felt like the whole world belongs to me. But I don't know how they came there. I have no idea.

Because afterwards, my parents wanted we should be like all the kids. I mean when my parents came, we were both married. My marriage, my father wanted to annul it because I was too young. I was 16 when I got married. My sister, she got married, she was about 22. So it was all right. But with me, it was not all right. But he did not do it.

Another question?

It's either I said it so well that they know everything--

Well, I have a question. Tell me how you got to this country.

I came to this country in 1960. In 1957, my husband died on his woundings. He was wounded. He was in the army.

And you had already two children by then, right?

No, I didn't have two children. No I didn't have. I just met him-- oh, by '57?

By '57.

Yes, I had two children. Yes. Oh, no, no, [LAUGHTER] how could I have had two children at 16? So I wasn't that good.

But you told us were bad.

Yeah. I was, but not that good. Yeah. I had two children at that time. And I asked to come to the United States.

And when I came there the guy said to me in other words, what have you lost? I said, what I have lost? If it wasn't for my husband, you wouldn't be sitting here. I said my husband was the one who got Prague out of the Germans. And you are telling me that?

Anyway, I didn't get nothing. They didn't allow--

So they wouldn't let you leave?

No. And then there was another one who also was a widow. And she-- I don't know what she really did. I didn't know

her. But I was told about her. And she was put in jail, and her children were alone. And I never ever asked again to go. After he told me and I opened my mouth to him, I thought I better close my mouth with a zipper and not talk again because I was really very scared.

Did the incident with the German soldier come back to your mind? You're putting yourself in danger.

Danger, you know, I really didn't want to talk about it anymore. And then, it was 1960. All of a sudden, it was in March, I think, when I got a letter from the office that I can go to the United States if I give up my pension. I had a beautiful pension, military pension. My children had a military pension. I give up the house and also my citizenship, and I can go.

And I did not go. I was scared to death. That it's a trap or whatever it is, because you never knew with the Russians what it is. And so I didn't go and I didn't go.

And then once-- you see, my late husband was the adjutant to the general in the army. And he always helped my children to go to the camp in the summer. And I knew him well. So I went to him and I showed him the letter I got.

He said, what did you do? I said, I didn't do anything. I came to you because I'm afraid. He said, don't send your kids to school. I will be with them tomorrow and you go there. I promise you with my life that you will be with your children. If you go to America, I can't promise you. But you'll see your children.

So I went. And the guy who was there said, so what happened? I said you change your mind. And I feel I wouldn't see my mother ever again if I don't go now. I would like to go. So that's how I went.

Did you speak any English at all?

Not a word. Not a word. When I came, I saw only men. And I said in Czech, God bless, America. I thought it was very nice that all there were men greeting me. And they wanted to know if I speak another language. I said, yes. So they asked me German or Russian or whatever. I said Yes. They said, do you have anything you would like to tell us? I said, not a word.

I was so scared about the Russians that every man I saw I thought it could be bad for me. I don't know what. But I don't want to talk. And I didn't talk.

When I came home, my brother-in-law asked me about his friends or so on. I didn't say nothing. And he said, what's wrong with you? Are you nuts? You don't want to tell me?

I said, I don't have anything to tell you. He said, you have nothing to tell me? I said, no, nothing. They couldn't believe I really and truly wouldn't talk.

In Czechoslovakia, they used to say-- by the way, I say Czechoslovakia, not the Czech Republic because when I was born and I was there, it was Czechoslovakia. And I really and truly was scared to death for the Russians. And it took me about a month before I could speak a little bit.

My mother wasn't a big help either. She said, I will speak to you only in Russian. Her accent-- I have an accent too, but I have no accent in comparison to my mother. Her accent, you could hear three miles away. She spoke with such a big accent. It was terrible.

And I said, you can speak it. I don't understand a word you say. She says, you will learn. I said, I don't know if I can learn that way. But I did learn. I did learn.

So what was your impression of the United States?

When I came, I came to New York with a boat. And I have never, ever been in a big city like New York. I have never seen so much beauty and the same time so much ugliness like I saw in New York. It was really both.

Wow.

It was very nice, very different.

Did you think, oh, what have I done?

No. The first year I would have probably walked back to Prague, not driven or flown, but walked. Because with my mother speaking to me only in English, which I couldn't understand the words, and I couldn't find a job too because I didn't speak. And then I found a job as a nurse, as a baby nurse. I took a test.

I almost flunked that one because they said, what do you do when the kid cries? I says you take care if it's not something wrong with it if it's not wet and then you let it cry. They said, not in America. [LAUGHTER] You don't let it cry in America. I said, I don't know, not the way I did with my children. But not in America. You don't let them cry. So that was that.

We have just a few minutes--

Yeah, I want to tell you--

Do you want to make a final statement?

Yeah, I want to make a final statement, which I would like to leave you all. When my father realized that we are not speaking German to my mother. And he said, why don't you speak German? And I really told my father I have a passport for hate. My father said you have no such thing.

And then when I insisted on not speaking German and I gave him my ideas, he said you are really not better than the worst Nazi there was. And I got up and I left. I was so hurt that my father told me that.

And then I walked out. My mother said, are you going go back and apologize? I said, no, I will not. It took me like five minutes, maybe six. And I went back and I apologized.

You see, I wasn't as smart as my sister. My sister understood my father in no time. When he explained to her that he would like it should be a better world from the world we left, that we saw so much ugliness, so many bad things, that he wouldn't like to see his grandchildren see that thing too. And he would like it should be better.

And maybe, just maybe, if we are going to start not to hate and we will start instead to love and teach our children the same, maybe, just maybe, it will be a better life. When I understood what my father was doing-- and my father was beaten, I threw myself on top of my father when he was beaten. And my father was the one who talked to us that we shouldn't hate.

And you know what? I don't hate anybody. I don't love everybody. Some people I don't like at all. So I ignore them. But I don't hate them.

There is no reason to hate. The word hate should be taken out of the dictionary. It shouldn't exist-- not for people. And everybody who has a religion, you should respect the other religion always. And it should never be a problem about religion or anything at all to hate. That's what I would like to leave you with.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you.

Thank you. That concludes today's program. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much.

You did fabulous.

Thank you.

Thank you. Oh, no, thank you. Will you be--