

[SIDE CONVERSATIONS] 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. Thank you for joining us today. We are in our eighth season of First Person. 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. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. With three exceptions, including next Wednesday, April 4, we will have a First Person guest each Wednesday through August 29. The museum's website, www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a list of upcoming first person guests under the Public Programs section of the website.

This 2007 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Dora Smith foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring First Person. Erika Eckstut will share with us 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're introduced to her, I have several requests of you. We ask, first, that, if possible, please stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions for Erika or for our audience. Second, if you have a question during our question-and-answer period, and we certainly hope you will, please make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so everyone in the room, including Erika, hears the question. And then she'll respond to you.

And finally, I'd like to ask any of those of you who have a pager or cell phone that's not yet turned off to please do so. I'd also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition today know that they are good for the rest of the afternoon. So you can stay with us through 2 o'clock and then go to the permanent exhibition.

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.

What you are about to hear from Erika Eckstut is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Erika's introduction. Erika Eckstut was born June 12, 1928, the second daughter of Dollie and Ephram Neuman. Here we see Erika with her parents and sister Beatrice. Erika is the youngest, in the middle of the photograph.

She was born in Znojmo, Czechoslovakia, to which our arrow points, where her father was a well respected attorney. In 1931, Erika, her sister Beatrice, and parents moved to the province of Bukovina in Romania. Our arrow points to Romania, the home of Erika's paternal grandparents.

In the Romanian town of Stanesti, Erika attended a public school as well as the Hebrew school, which her father had helped found. Erika's father is at the top of the photograph in the middle. Beatrice, her sister, is directly below her father. And Erika is beneath Beatrice, with another child between the two of them.

Erika enjoyed being with members of her family and experienced a childhood filled with hopes and dreams. Here we see Erika's parents at the top right. Her father's brother is to their left. And her father's parents flank Erika's great-grandmother in the front row.

In 1940, the Soviet Union occupied the province of Bukovina, including the town of Stanesti. A year later, when Romania joined Nazi Germany, the Soviets were driven from Stanesti. In the fall of 1941, the Neumans were forced to settle in the Czernowitz ghetto, where the living conditions were poor and the Jews were subject to deportation to Transnistria. Here we see Erika's identification card with the yellow star.

This photo is of Erika while living in the ghetto. In 1943, Erika and her sister Beatrice escaped from the ghetto on false papers that their mother had obtained. After escaping to the Soviet Union, Erika and Beatrice returned to Czechoslovakia, where they eventually were reunited with their parents. Erika married an officer in the Czech army and raised two children. She emigrated to the United States in 1960. We close our slide presentation with Erika's wedding photo.

Today, Erika lives here in the Washington, D.C. area with her husband, Dony, who is with us in the audience, right here, as a matter of fact, Dony. Give a wave. Make sure everybody sees you. [LAUGHS]

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 five great-grandchildren. Erika volunteers here at the museum at the donor desk and membership desk, where you will find her on Fridays. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our "first person," Mrs. Erika Eckstut.

[APPLAUSE]

(WHISPERING) I'm going to sit you close. Yeah. Are you comfortable there?

OK.

Erika, thank you for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person today. 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.

Yeah.

In 1940, Romania was occupied by the Russians. And then in 1941, when you were just 13, the Germans entered Romania, forever changing your family's life and your community. Before we turn to those terrible years, Erika, let's start with you telling us a bit about your family, your community, and yourself before the war began.

My name was Erika Neuman. I had one sister and my parents. And I had there my grandparents, and I had also, I-- I'm sorry. And when it started for us, it-- when it started for us, the whole thing, we came there when I was about two years or two and a half years old. And my father told my grandfather what he wants to do. And my grandfather said it's really a very good idea, but you will have to have somebody who will take my horse, my cow, and the chickens.

My father couldn't find anybody who would take a horse, a cow, and chickens. And so we couldn't go anywhere, and we stayed. My father got a very good job. He became a big thing. It was almost like he became the mayor of the town. And we had a wonderful life.

When I came there, I really and truly don't remember much. I am not a genius. I used to say that I have a memory like an elephant, but I didn't have a memory like an elephant. I can't remember nothing.

But once I started to go to school, I really remember everything. And I know I loved to be with my grandfather. I loved to be with anybody and everybody. I also never heard in the town that somebody called me you are a Jew or whatever. I never knew that. I don't know if that was because my father had the job he had. Or whatever it was, I don't know.

But a lot of people would invite me to come and eat something, be with them. And I would go to anybody who invited me. I was a good eater, and whatever they gave me I always ate. And then, when it came the time when the-- when the Russians came in, which was in 1940, then it wasn't anymore good.

Erika, before you tell us about that, just a couple of questions for you. You described yourself to me once as a "wild duck." Well, what did what did you mean by that?

I was a very bad tomboy. But I wasn't really a bad tomboy. I was a tomboy, but I was really a good tomboy. I never did

anything really wrong, but my father thought I did. And he used to have lectures for me and lectures. And a lecture would take an hour to listen to. And he would say, you can't take the law in your own hands. But my grandfather was really the culprit of it because he used to make from me a tomboy, like I was.

He didn't have any grandsons. He just had my sister and me. My sister was absolutely fantastic. All she liked to do was read. I never liked to read. And I liked to be with my grandfather. And I used to get a lot of-- a lot of, lot of lectures from my father.

I seem to remember you telling me about your grandfather's fermented cherries.

Yeah, that was-- I went to Romanian school and I also went to Hebrew school. The Hebrew school, my father and his friends, they started the Hebrew school. And in the Hebrew school, there was a deal, whatever, or a law that at the end of the year they had usually a-- they would have a theater and to say a poem and so on. And I also had to learn the poem. And when I had to learn the poem, I didn't come to my grandfather.

And my grandfather was very upset about it. And you see, when I would be there, he would always give me some cherries. My grandfather was a man who did everything himself. There was a relative there who was a veterinarian. He never needed him. When the cow had a little one or the horse, he took care of everything. He never needed anybody.

And so in his garden, he had cherries. They were sour cherries. And he made wine from it. And those cherries he gave me to eat, and I liked them. They were very good. And when I came back, that I knew already the poem, my grandfather said, when you have to go and tell the poem, you come to my house and I will give you some cherries. So I came. I loved them.

So he gave me a little bowl of cherries, and I ate them. And when it came to tell the poem, I started the first four lines, then I went to the last, then I went in the middle, then I started from the beginning. And I said it very well, the whole poem. And I know I said it well because everybody was clapping. So I knew I did everything right.

And when I came down from the podium, my father stood there. And he said, breathe on me. And I did. And before anything could be said, I heard my grandfather say, if you want to talk, I'm here. And they didn't really talk to each other, I heard, for a week. And I never got again the cherries.

[LAUGHTER]

Erika, your father was a wounded veteran of the First World War.

Yes.

And at one point, hadn't the family considered moving to Palestine. And if not, why not?

Yeah. That's why we came really to Romania, because he wanted to take his parents with us. He was the only son which lived in Europe. He had three-- I mean, he had four brothers. One fell in the First World War, and the three of them were in the United States of America. So the only living son in Europe was my father. And he did not want to go to Palestine without his parents.

And I have to tell it, but my father was the smartest guy you have ever, ever met, the nicest. He gave me a lot of lectures and I didn't like it. That's true. But otherwise, he was really and truly the most wonderful man anybody has ever, ever met. That's about my father.

So the family ended up, because of that, not going to Palestine. And then, of course, you fell under Russian domination.

You know, before the Russians really came, in 1937, the Iron Guard came. And the Iron Guard was something similar like the Germans had, with their-- they also hated the Jews. They hated everybody else, which somebody else hated, and they weren't very good at all. And they accused my father of having a gun when he goes to court or whatever, which

wasn't true. He didn't have it.

But anyway, they took him to court. And then my father, he did his own thing. He-- he didn't look for a lawyer. I don't think a lawyer would have taken it. And everything was fine. And he was reinstated. And he was again, you know, what he was before. That was in '37.

And in 1940, the Russians came. That was not very good for us kids because we had to learn Russian. And even so, it was also a language, a Slavic language like Czech was. But the alphabet was not the same. And it was not the same. Some words were similar. You could understand it. But basically it was very hard for us.

But we were young, and we all learned the language very well. And I became the best student I ever was. I was never such a good student like I was under the Russians. I was so afraid of them that, no matter what they did, I did better. So that was the life under the Russians.

And then, of course, Erika, I think in 1941 the Germans came. And then life changed immediately.

Then everything changed. When the Russians left in 1940, at the end of the year, the Romanian who were there, they went with the Germans. And the first night, when they took us out, it was-- I really don't know what to call it. It was they killed all the people. They took us from our house to where the rest of the people-- there were about 500 Jews in that town. And they came, and they picked us up. It was my father, my mother, my sister, and I.

And when we got there, in the middle-- it wasn't really a circle, but there was standing our rabbi and his two sons. And without saying anything or whatever, they killed them in front of us. Then they took men and men and men again, and they killed every single man they could. Then they ran out of ammunition.

They took a man, which happened to be my uncle. And when they shot him once, they didn't kill him. And they killed him by hand. You know, like I said, my father was absolutely fantastic, absolutely fantastic. And I felt, if I'll ask him, he'll give me a good answer. But my father didn't have a good answer.

You see, all the children were crying. And of course, we were crying too. And I asked my father, are we also going to die. And my father said, please don't cry. How could I not cry? I didn't know nothing. He just said don't cry. It was impossible not to cry. What else could you do?

And when they killed my uncle, that was about the worst thing I have ever seen. This whole night was about the worst night. And I think my problem is that I didn't learn enough words or the right words to explain how terribly bad that was for us.

And you know, I did have a stroke. And I was worried that I forgot what I went through. I did not forget what I went through. Maybe here and there, I don't remember a word. But I never forgot. It was so bad that I can't even begin to tell you. And I don't really even like to go into it too much because when I come to speak, the first thing I want to do is cry. But I don't cry. I get over it. It just takes me a minute, and I get over it.

But it was really terrible, what went on. And after we-- when they didn't have enough ammunition, they took us to the courthouse. And my--

So what saved your life, Erika, at that point was the fact they ran out of ammunition?

No. That wasn't what saved our life. They took us to the courthouse. And when we were in the courthouse, my father didn't walk in. He stood and he took a cigarette, and he smoked. And a man came over and told him he'll take him home. He said, I'm not going nowhere. He said, I'll take your parents too. And my father went.

When we came home, the house was not the same. Everything was upside down. That's what saved us, our life because when, the next day, there came the police chief, who used to be the police chief before the Russians were there. And he told my father that he's going to take us away tomorrow. As soon as it gets dark outside, he's going to take us. And he

did.

But at that time, very few men were left. I don't know how many when that happened. And when we went-- when it got a little dark outside, he did come. And he took us all. The problem was that my father and my grandmother couldn't have walked. The rest of us could, but they couldn't.

And as we walked, my father didn't feel good. And my mother said she's going to get some water. And my father fell over. And I got so scared. And they started to cry, my grandparents. My sister went with my mother, and I would beat on him and say, please, talk to me. Talk to me. He didn't.

Then finally, he made with his hand that he's all right. He said, you know, I'm all right. And my mother came, and we came to Czernowitz.

And so you walked to this other town. What happened when you got to Czernowitz?

When we got to Czernowitz, maybe a few days later, there was a ghetto. And we had to go to the ghetto. In the ghetto, we were-- I don't know-- 16 or 20. I really have no idea how many people were in one room. The whole thing, it was no food there, no school. I mean, school we didn't have ready for a while. I mean, the Jews didn't count at all. And the food was absolutely nothing.

And my father was not taken to work. He was an invalid, and they didn't take him. My sister used to go. And it depended how you looked. If you looked a little older, they took you too. If you didn't, then you didn't go to work. And my father, and some other people like my father, who couldn't-- they didn't take them to work, decided that they are going to teach us something, that in the Jewish religion, there is a law. If you don't learn, why would you live?

So they started to teach us. And my father taught us the French Revolution. And I remember, I never paid attention. I heard him talk about Helen and the--

Napoleon, you told me.

Napoleon and all, but I mean, it didn't-- I really didn't pay attention. And my father, when he asked me something, I didn't know nothing because I never paid attention. And my father, when we were alone, he said, you know, you really hurt my feelings. I says, what did I do? He said, when I ask you a question, you never had any idea what I'm asking you. I said, I didn't have any idea because I never listened.

[LAUGHTER]

And I was very, very hungry, and all I was thinking of was a piece of bread. So how could I have paid attention whatever you said? But you see, when my father told me that, it really bothered me a lot because I absolutely adored my father. And like I told you, I really don't have the words. If my father would be here-- anyway, I decided that I'm going to do something about it. And you saw on the-- when they showed the pictures, that I got the ID in the ghetto. And I also was a yellow star on the coat.

So I took that, the star and the ID, and I left it wherever I slept, and I walked out. I was never worried--

Out of the ghetto?

Out of the ghetto. And you see, in our ghetto, there were only a lot of policemen and also soldiers who were wounded. They came home, they were there. And I didn't think that anybody is going to pay attention to me, you know. I have blue eyes, and I had blonde hair. That's not the right color. I did it yesterday, but it didn't come out right.

[LAUGHTER]

But I really couldn't-- I'm sorry about that. But anyway, I couldn't do nothing about that. But anyway, I walked and

nobody stopped me or anything. And you see, my father had a friend when he was in third, fourth grade. I don't know when, but I heard my mother talking to the women about it. And they asked, do you know him? And my mother said, I met him once, but you know, my husband doesn't like even to talk about it. And I knew his name. I listened. To that I listened.

And when I walked out, I went to the store where they sold there for nuns and for priests. And I bought whatever I thought would be all right for us. And when it came to pay, I told them Father so-and-so is going to pay. I forgot his name now. I don't know it anymore. That's maybe because I had a stroke. I don't know. But they wrote down the name and they gave me the food, and I went home.

When I came home, my mother fainted because she didn't believe that she will ever see me again. My father took me aside and wanted to know how I paid. I said I didn't have any money. I gave them the name of your friend. He said, what? I said, you know, your priest.

He said didn't you remember the policeman? I said, why should I remember the policeman? He said, if the policeman would have been caught when he took us out from Stanesti, he would have been killed just as much as we would have been killed. How could you have done it?

I didn't even think about it. I really didn't think about the policeman either. And my father said, you will have to go and tell him what you did. And the next day, I went.

You see, the priest was a very nice priest. He was a Greek priest, Greek Orthodox priest. And when I told him what I did, he said that's perfectly all right. He said, you can do it as much as you want. But you have to promise me that you will not talk to anybody about it. I said, my father knows. He said, that's fine.

And you know, when I was thinking about it now, when I'm an adult and all, if there would have been more people who would have done what he did, who would have done what the policeman said, so many people wouldn't have been killed. On the other hand, if you want to take it both sides, it was really hard to try to do anything good for anybody, any Jew or whatever, because there was a big line. They said, if you would help any Jew, you and your whole family is going to be killed. So you know, it was hard. But that priest was really a good man.

And I used to go for food about almost a year. And then once when I walked out, I saw a soldier who was on crutches. He stood on one. And with the other crutch, he beat a man. And you could see he was a Jewish man, and he was bleeding. I don't know how and why, but I started to give him a lecture my father used to give me. And I remembered every word he said.

And I told him you can't take the law in your own hands. And you can't do that and so on. He said, that's nothing but a Jew. I said, who cares? But you can't do that. And as I'm talking to him, all of a sudden, I felt somebody on my hand says, OK, now we are going to go home. And when I heard the word home, I knew I couldn't go home. Because I knew if I go home, me and my family is going to be killed.

For good measure, they could take five, 10, or 15 or 20 people. I don't know how many, but they take always for good measure others too. So I knew that outside the ghetto there were--

And Erika, this was a policeman who was saying to you--

Oh, that was a policeman, of course. Yeah. And I knew that he was living there alone. So I went and I rang the bell. And when I heard her with the keys, I said, Mama. And when she opened the door, she said, I told you once, I told you twice, home and homework. And in the meantime, the policeman asked her right away, is that your daughter, Madame? She didn't answer him. He asked her constantly, and she beat me.

You know, she started the next thing, which was very legal. And she went right and left and right and left. And I thought that for sure my head is going to fall down. It's impossible. It was so hurtful, the way she hurt me. And instead of my head should fall down, I saw that I heard the policemen say, stop hitting her. Take her in. She'll do the homework.

And very slowly she took me in. And she asked me, where are you from? And I told her, from the ghetto. She said, you will have to go home.

And this was a woman you had never met before?

Never met. I never saw her before. And you know what, this name, Mrs. Bokansha, I remember to today. The name of the priest, I forgot like I forgot a lot of other things too. But I forgot, but her name I never forgot. She really saved my life. She never, ever talked to the policeman. She just gave it to me but good. And I think the reason she hit me so hard was because she was just as afraid as I was.

And after that, maybe two days later, it came for us to go to the concentration camp. And we went on Makkabiplatz. That was where they used to play all kind of-- they played ball and whatever they played there. It was a big, big place. And we went through there.

And my father thought he saw somebody, and he waved. And the soldier came over and knocked him down. It didn't take much to knock my father down. And he started to hit him. I couldn't see anybody hitting my father. And I never thought of doing anything else but putting myself on top of my father, which I did.

And the thing was that I felt right away that he kept beating me like there was no tomorrow. When I really woke up, because I don't remember that he hit me long, I was in the ghetto. And I said, what am I doing in the ghetto when I was supposed to be in Transnistria. That was our-- when we went to the concentration camp. And when I wanted to talk, something was bothering me. And I heard my mother say, don't worry. Just keep still.

The doctor-- there was a doctor in the ghetto, too. And he was trying to put my back right because it was a right shoulder wasn't right. It went out. And he put something in your mouth you shouldn't scream. And that's what happened.

And then my father asked my mother to go to the priest and ask him if he could give her two papers for the children, that we could go away. And my mother went. My mother was a beautiful woman. She had blonde hair, blue eyes, really beautiful blue eyes. And she went to the priest. And he told her, if you bring the children here, I will make them Greek Orthodox.

And my mother told him she really didn't want to make us Greek Orthodox. She just wanted a way that the kids could leave the ghetto. And he was also, like I said before, a very good man. And he gave us the papers. And he gave her two crosses. And he told her that the Greeks cross the other way than the Catholics or the other religion. And my mother had the papers, and we left.

And we came to Russia, to Kyiv.

Just your sister and you.

Just my sister and I. My father, before we left, had a long speech for us. And he told us that, from now on, wherever we go, no matter what religion we come across, there is absolutely doesn't make a difference, we have to be extremely nice to every religion because we are taking a religion which is not ours. And if we survive, we should go back and be Jews. And if we die, we'll die as Jews. And we have to just be very nice. And I must say, I can say it very clearly and honestly. I have never, ever, ever was anything but respectful to any religion. I come across.

And in Russia it was terrible for us. We had to find a place to stay. My sister found a woman who had two daughters. And they said, this corner is free. You can have this corner. And then on the other corner was another woman. And there was no bed, just on the floor we stayed there. And as we stayed there on the floor, about three weeks later she said that she needs to have that place and we have to leave. So we had to leave.

We went somewhere else, and we couldn't find-- and you know, wherever we went in Russia, there was never a bathroom available. And my sister made me wash outside. She would say, get undressed and wash yourself. I said, I

can't. It's cold. She says, it doesn't matter. You have to get-- and you have to wash this long hair. And I said, I can't. I'm going get pneumonia and die.

She says, don't worry. You want me to undress you? And I had to wash in ice-cold water. And I washed my hair. And then my sister got somewhere-- I don't know where she found some petroleum. And she washed my hair with the petroleum. And when I got in, the man who was there, who stayed there, gave me one shave with his big foot, and I was outside.

It was so cold outside. But I stunk so badly from this alcohol, from this-- not alcohol--

Petroleum.

--from petroleum that he didn't want to have a fire. He had a little stove there. So he threw me out, and I went out.

Erika did you-- because you had been under the Russians for that one year, were you both able to speak Russian to get by?

Yeah. Yeah. Of course, my sister had no problems. I didn't have a problem speaking either. That I learned. The other thing was besides the point, but that I learned.

And before long your sister was able to find work in Kyiv?

Yeah, my sister found work. And I went to school for a short time. And there I met a nurse who was about two years older than me. And we became friends. And in 1944, on December 24, I was in her house. And I stayed there like I always did. And she told me that we'll have a very good time. I said, what are we going to do? We are going to meet some very nice boys.

I thought that was really nice. But I knew if I tell my sister anything about that, she's not going to like that. I said, how are we going to do it? I never talked to her that my sister is my sister. Or we had this old lady with us too, whatever she is, I never talked about it. And she said, you see, tomorrow, after the holiday, the NKVD, which was the secret police in Russia, is going to come and pick up the spy you have with you. That was my sister.

Her hair was so blonde, it was really-- she really looked like a German. I mean, there was no doubt about that. And I said, that's really very good. And I went home, and I told my sister and the old lady. And they said we have to run. And so we started running.

We didn't have anything to worry about because whatever we had we had lost. We were at one time in a train, and my sister said, I will sleep on it because you sleep too hard. So she slept on it. In the morning, we didn't have anything. So we didn't have anything to worry to take with us.

Erika, just so, so I understand this, this friend of yours thinks that your sister-- she doesn't know she's your sister-- believes that she's a spy, a German spy, and is letting that she's going to get arrested. And so that's when you run.

That's why, how I knew it. And as we were running, we came to a forest. And all of a sudden, we heard a man's voice say do the secret word of the--

The password.

--the password of the army. And the old lady says, three women running. And he had a little-- what do you call it-- flashlight. And he put the flashlight on her. And then he put it on his face. And the next thing you knew, they hugged each other. It was the mother and son.

She had two sons. We didn't know it until that time. And she had a husband. The husband was killed before that. And she was hoping that the sons will join the army because in 1942, the Czech government started an army in Russia with

General Svoboda. And the younger son was there. The older they didn't know where he was. And the son said he's going go and tell the officers, and we'll go with them.

And he came back, and he said, no, we can't go because we don't have clothes. They can't take civil people with them. They are in tanks. And so we didn't know what we are going to do. And then after a while he came and he said he's going to take his mother, and two of his friends are going to take the girls. So that's what happened. And then when they let us out--

And they took you in tanks?

He took us in tanks. Yeah, that's why he needed two people because they couldn't go three, I think, in the tank, only two.

So you're escaping through the woods in tanks.

Yeah, we are going in tanks. It didn't matter what we went. We went-- ach, where we didn't go. And in Poland-- that was in January already. The son took us to the first house he saw. And he told the lady that he has a wife of an officer with her two daughters and that he's going to come to pick them up tomorrow, if she has place for them.

And this is on the border, right?

That's in Poland. Not on the border, that's already in Poland.

Already in Poland, OK.

In Poland. And she said we can go upstairs. And so we walked upstairs. I didn't get undressed or anything. And then all of a sudden my sister comes in, and she said we have to go through the window. I heard her say that she has here three Jews, and they can have them.

But when the lady heard it, she started to talk to my sister that she can't run anymore. And we should go, and she's going to keep them and all. But she couldn't. She said, you know, she can't run.

So my sister opened the window. She jumped. And she said, you just throw the lady out. So I asked her, do you want to go to the window? She said, no. I said, would you like that in your mouth? She said, no. So I just pushed her to the window, and I threw her out.

[LAUGHTER]

And then my sister, who was shorter than she was and like a string bean, nothing, she was holding her hands. And she really and truly broke her fall. Not that she stopped her, but she broke and nothing happened. But then the hands was not held for me anymore, and I jumped too, and nothing happened. And then we got in a car and we came to Slovakia, to the first town in Slovakia.

And there were a lot of Czech soldiers there. And they gave us a lot of food. What they gave us, I really don't remember. But I know we ate everything. I think only the plates were left. And we got very sick. All three of us got very sick. And then they were trying-- what they are going to do with us. And they said that they will take the lady in the army. And we found out she was really not that old. She was about 37 or 38. I don't know.

But to you she'd been this old lady throughout the whole time.

But through the-- all the time, we called her the old lady. When you are 15, you know, I mean, if you are 37, you are an old lady. Today I think she was a young lady, but then I thought she was an old.

Then they said that my sister could go to. But they would have to send me to Russia, where they have a place for children. I didn't want to go to Russia. I wouldn't go to Russia then, and I wouldn't go to Russia now. I didn't want to go.

So they said my sister can get married maybe.

And where we were staying with the man there, they would come, soldiers in, and look at us. And once a man came in, he was an officer. And he took one look at my sister, and she really was beautiful. And he said, I will marry you, and I will be good to you, and I will take your sister too.

And my smart sister said, I don't know you. I don't love you. And I don't even know how to cook. And I don't want to get married. So he left.

[LAUGHTER]

And that was the end of our thing. And the army also left. And when the army left, that same night somebody threw a stone where we slept. And when I woke up, my sister was giving him-- she had on a chain-- this chain, my sister made for my mother with the ring from my father in the picture of my sister and me. She had from home a little four-leaf-- what do you say?

Clover.

Clove-- that's what she gave the guy to take us. We didn't have any money. So he took us to the next town, which was Humenná. And he took us to a woman who had a little baby. I really don't know how old the baby was, 17 months, 15 months. I have no idea. And he wanted to know if we could do this or that. And he said we can do everything. We were just perfect.

So she said she has to go somewhere. She doesn't have any food. But she had some soldiers sleeping. She needs to wash the floors and take care of the baby. And she had a few noodles for the baby.

So my sister said, you take care of the baby. I'll wash the floors. She was never to take care of babies. So I took care of him. And I didn't do a good job because I didn't know how to do the noodles. And when I cooked it, they were hot. So I put it in my mouth, I chewed it, and put it in his mouth. He probably was as hungry as I was because he ate anything I gave him. And then all of a sudden, I hear, you German spy. You are going at it-- and guns and all.

I took-- I was right away out. And I went in front of my sister. All three guns were-- they were three officers, Russian. And they were really mad. But I was in front of my sister. And I told her in a different language, you disappear. And they said, where is she? I said, she's here. She's no place.

But they, again they thought your sister was a German spy?

A German, yeah. And I told them that she's married to a Czech officer. And they didn't really believe me very much. And I was talking and talking, and I began to cry too. And then all of a sudden, a Czech soldier came in. I felt, what does a Czech soldier have to do here? And just to make sure that they believe me, I said to him, you know, Beatrice? He didn't know nothing. But he thought that I need some help. And whatever I said, he said, yes. Yes.

And then the Russians left. And I asked him, what are you doing here? And he said that where we were in Snina-- we were now in Humenná, but we were in Snina before-- that there were 16 Jews there. And when they realized that they were three Jews there, and they had a very nice time, they all 16 came out, and all 16 were killed. So the officers thought that we were killed too. And the man where we stayed said no, that he took us to Humenná and told them where we are. And that's why they sent the soldier to find out if we are really there, which we were.

My sister wanted to know if he knows where the officer is who wanted to marry her. And he said, he's fighting somewhere. He doesn't know where he is. That was in January. By March, she found the officer. And at that point, she asked him if he would marry her. He said, I told you then and I told you now, I will marry you. And they got married on March 31. She didn't want to get married on the 1st. It shouldn't be a joke, so she--

And he really and truly loved her to the day he passed away. He said, she is my queen. And my sister loved him too. He

was a very nice guy. He was 15 years older than my sister. And he's now he passed away. My sister is all right. She's in New York. But he passed away.

And then at her wedding, the best man was an officer. And he was tall, much, much taller than me. He about 5' 4", and I was-- he was 6' 4", and I was 5' 4". And he said that I'm a nice little girl. And I felt, he's right. I must be a nice little girl. And he asked me to marry him. And I said, of course, what else can I do? And I married him.

And it's, maybe for some people, it's really funny. For me, what else could I have done? My sister was married. I couldn't go to school. That was in April. You know, I mean, after the wedding.

And I felt that I didn't work-- I mean, he wasn't my boyfriend. He asked me, and I said yes.

The only problem was, when we went to get married, they wouldn't marry us because I wasn't old enough to get married and I didn't have my parents to give me away. And I couldn't have anybody who would give me away. And then my husband found that he found an aunt who was alive. She was married to a non-Jewish person. And her husband became my guardian. And in August we got married.

Erika, so you got married in August of 1945.

1945, August 28.

And of course, now the war is over. And the next part of your life would begin. Why don't we turn to our audience and ask if they have any questions of you for a few minutes. And then there's a couple of other things I'd like, before we close, I'd like you, of course, to talk about. So if you have questions, and I'll repeat it after you ask it, OK?

Did you, as a young child, know what was going on with the Jews?

No.

The question is, Erika, did you as a young child know what was happening to Jews?

No. He didn't know. He was months old. I don't know, 14, 15, months. He hardly really spoke at all. I mean, he revert to [INAUDIBLE]. He was a very cute little baby, but he was a baby.

When you were a child, did you realize what was going on? I think that's--

No, I didn't realize what was going on. And I really didn't read the papers either.

Right. OK. Do we have another question? Yes, ma'am.

Was the last time that you saw your parents ever when you--

No, to this we didn't come.

Erika, the question is, when was the last time you saw your parents? And this is one of the things, of course, we want to hear about.

Was is the last time when I left? But when the war was over, our-- we were-- on May 9 was, for us, the war over. And we were very happy the war was over. But now we started to where are our parents? And it was very hard to find out. Then finally, through America and all, we found out that our parents were in Bucharest.

We left them in Czernowitz, in the northern part of Bukovina. And they were now in the capital of Romania. But we couldn't go anywhere because, when the war was over, the great thing I did, which was the stupidest thing I could have done, was I tore my papers away that I was Greek Orthodox. Because my father said, you'll be a Jew. You were born a

Jew, you die a Jew. So I didn't need it anymore.

My sister has her papers till today. She wouldn't give it to me to show it because she has it. It's hers. I also had, when I went in Kyiv to school, I was also a good student, better than ever. And I got a thing from Lenin and Stalin as the best student and all. I tore that away too. What did I need it for? I could use it now to show that I was a good student.

[LAUGHTER]

I have nothing to prove it now. I do have. I went to medical school here, just I became a medical technologist. I didn't become a doctor. I could have become a doctor. At that, just before I got a stipendium-- how do you say it-- that I would have gotten paid, everything would have been paid. But I couldn't have--

Oh, scholarship.

Scholarship. But I couldn't have taken my children with me. And at that time, I had my husband there. And he wanted to marry me, so I married him instead of going to school and becoming a doctor. So I became just a technician.

Erika, the story of how you actually reunited with your parents, I think everybody will want to hear that.

Yeah. Then finally, our husbands, you know, my husband, my sister's husband, they went to Romania and they got our parents. When our parents came, when I told you about the moment when they killed all the people in Stanesti, it was the worst time I ever had. And I think that's-- you see, I didn't speak about whatever happened to me until 1989. '89, it was not '88. That was I met a lady who is a teacher, Flora Singer. And she was the one who said that I have to talk about it.

I said, no, I don't. She says, yes, you do. And she's a person who, when she wants something, she gets it. And she got me to talk. When I told her the first time my story, she said, you just have to. At that time, the museum wasn't built or anything. She says, we are speaking downstairs in a children's museum. And she took me downstairs. And I spoke. But like here, I almost started to cry when I started to talk.

I cried there all the time. All the time I spoke, I cried and spoke, cried and spoke. And it really wasn't very much of a thing. But I was there. And she said, you have to do it again. And we had also a lot of calls from relatives. I didn't know that I have so many relatives. Then I never heard from them anyway. And they wanted to know if that was me. And I spoke.

And now, we got our parents. That was the happiest moment of my whole, entire life.

Your husband's drove them up to you, didn't they?

They drove them up. I was with my sister. And my sister was and is a lady. She takes one step at a time, not two and not three. I took three and four. And I was downstairs. She was still going there one step at a time.

[LAUGHTER]

And when I came down and I saw the car, I ran. And my father opened the door and ran out. The car stopped-- my husband stopped the car, and he ran. And my mother was crying, the cane, the cane. He didn't take the cane. He was in my arm. And we had our parents.

But then we had a very bad thing with my father. You see, when the war was over, my sister and I, we were not the nice little girls which left our parents. We were two hateful people. We hated everything. And there was nothing you can do to us or whatever. And my father started to talk to us.

And what completely shocked me was when my father said, you can't hate. I says, do you want me to love the Germans? He says, I'm not telling you to love. But you can't hate them. He says, you are going to become a no-person if you hate.

He said, maybe when you'll have children you'll be able to teach them to hate. What's going to happen? Are you ever going to change something?

And you know, the more my father talked, my sister understood it in no time. She was older, and she was, and she is smarter. She understood it. I didn't. It took me a while.

Once I understood what my father is trying to do-- and I know and I knew that my father is the smartest person I have ever come across. Once I understood what my father means, I didn't hate anymore. It was like somebody would take off me pounds. I got light.

I can't begin to tell you what it meant for me that I didn't hate anymore. And I don't hate. And I am so grateful to my father. And I am only sorry that I can't talk about him the way I would like to because he was the most wonderful person anybody could have ever had.

My mother was wonderful too. But my mother was also a lady. She would never come to you and kiss you. If you went to her, you could get a kiss. But she wouldn't ask you to give her a kiss. My father never asked you. My father just gave you a kiss. He was different. But it was really wonderful to have my father and to have my mother.

And then if I could just tell you how I left Czechoslovakia in 1960 and came to America, it would take not 40 minutes, 50 minutes, it would take at least a week. And that's how my father passed away during that time.

Erika, we're going to close the program in just a couple of minutes. And what you just heard from Erika about Czechoslovakia, after the war, she would end up living under Czechoslovakian and the Soviet domination until 1960. And am I right that you were the first person to legally be allowed to leave Czechoslovakia?

The first person.

And even intervened all the way to Khrushchev to get out.

I got that. Khrushchev let me out. My sister and my mother wrote him a nice telegram. And he-- we understand he wanted to do something for Eisenhower or whatever. And he let me go.

And I had asked before, and it was terrible. And I had two children, and we came out legally in 1960, in April. April 11, it's going to be 47 years that I am here.

And when I came, I wanted so much to say God bless America. But I couldn't speak one word of English. So I said it in Czech.

And Erika, of course, I think you met Dony in 1963.

Yeah. In '62 I met him, and in '63 we were married.

Well, Erika, I want to thank you for being our First Person. To all of you, I want to thank you for being our audience today. Before I turn back to Erika to close our program, I'd like to remind you that we will have a First Person each Wednesday until August 29. We have three exceptions to that, and one of them is next week. We won't have First Person because of Passover. But we'll resume again on April 11. So we would invite you back any Wednesday that you can make it between now and the end of August.

It's our tradition at First Person that our "first person" has the last word. And with that, I'd like to turn back to Erika to close today's program.

What I would like to let you know, I work at the museum, and we also work for what's going on in Darfur. And I have, from the papers, that no matter what they are doing, they are still going around and killing. And it's so unfair because we, all survivors, used to say never again. And here we have it again. And if anybody can do anything, to call your

person who is in charge, whatever, whatever can be done for them, it's very important to do.

And what I would like to leave everybody with is, if you really want to change the world, it should never really be again. Please, don't hate. Don't hate anybody. You don't have to love everybody. I mean, you know, you can't. But you don't have to hate them either.

Why would you hate anybody? If you'll start to love, and it's going to be a loving place, a loving way, it shouldn't be all the things which are going on, and it shouldn't be Darfur ever again. I would be very, very happy.

And for your information, I am a real survivor. I went through the Holocaust. And unfortunately, I don't have the right words to really tell you. What I could do is cry. But if I cry, you'll cry, and I don't like that.

I survived that. I survived Stalin too. And Stalin killed an awful lot of people. And most of all, I survived cancer. I had one day to live. That's 15 years ago. That's why, when people ask me, are you afraid of the plane, I said no. Are you afraid to go by boat? No, I'm not afraid of anything. Yeah, I'm afraid of mice, but that's about it.

[LAUGHTER]

That's true, I am. But really and truly, I'm really not afraid. I would like to leave everybody with the idea of never to hate again. Believe me, it is so much nicer if you don't hate anybody. It's so much easier. It's so easy to live. That's what I leave all of you with. And with that, I say goodbye.

And if you want, I have my story. I can give you it. Also, I have a-- today it's good. I didn't even need a candy. You know, I used to have lung cancer, and they couldn't do much for it. When I talk, if I take a sip of water, I start coughing that it's no end. But sometimes I get so dry that the only thing which helps me is a candy. So I took a candy here, and I didn't need it. It was a very good talk. Thank you very much.

And Erika--

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you.

And Erika will step down by the podium. So if you'd like to chat with Erika, please, please do. She'll stay behind to be able to do that with you.

I just want to tell you that today was the first flower in my garden. And I brought it for my boss, Miss Ellen Blalock. That's yours.

[APPLAUSE]