

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. We are in our eighth season of First Person. Our First Person today is Mrs. Helen Goldkind, whom you 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 the exception of August 1, we will have a First Person program each Wednesday through the 29th of August.

The museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a list of the upcoming First Person guests. 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 the First Person program.

Helen Goldkind will share her first-person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. Before you are introduced to her, I have several requests of you. First we ask that, if at all possible, especially given the size of our crowd today, we ask that you try to stay seated with us throughout the one-hour program. That way we minimize any disruptions for Helen as she shares her story with you.

Second, if we have time for questions at the end of the program, I ask that you make your question as brief as possible. I will repeat the question so everyone in the room, including Helen, hears the question. And then she'll respond to the question. If you have a cell phone or a pager that's not yet turned off, we would ask that you would do that now.

The Holocaust was a 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 Helen Goldkind is one individual's account of the Holocaust. In 1939, Hungary occupied the part of Czechoslovakia where Helen and her family lived. They lived under Hungarian rule until the German army occupied Hungary and the lands that it had occupied in response to Hungary starting to negotiate an armistice with the Allies. Life under the Hungarians was bad, but it would turn far worse under the Nazis.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Helen's introduction. We begin with this portrait of Helen Lebowitz Goldkind. Helen was born in 1928 in Volosyanka, Czechoslovakia. Helen was one of seven children born to a close-knit Jewish family. On this map of Europe, the arrow points to Czechoslovakia.

Helen's father owned a shoe store in their hometown of Volosyanka. When Hungarians closed her family's synagogue, her grandfather, fearing for the safety of the synagogue's Torah scroll, secretly brought it home. In 1944, Germans occupied her family's town. Hungarian officials ordered that the Jewish star be worn. And they rounded up Jews, sending them to the Uzhhorod ghetto. On this map of Czechoslovakia, the arrow points to the location of Uzhhorod.

Helen's family was deported to Auschwitz. The arrow on this map of major Nazi camps shows the location of Auschwitz. Helen was sent to work on a forced labor brigade in a Nazi munitions factory at another camp. And here we see a work brigade at a munitions factory camp.

Toward the end of the war, Helen was sent to the Bergen-Belsen camp. The arrow on this map points to the location of Bergen-Belsen. Here we see a photo of Bergen-Belsen. Helen was liberated from Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945. Here we see pictured liberated survivors from Bergen-Belsen.

Helen came to the United States in 1946. She married her husband, Abe, in 1947. They would move from Richmond, Virginia to Baltimore soon after their marriage. Helen and Abe had three children. One daughter is a microbiologist with the National Institutes of Health. Their other daughter is a psychologist. Their son is a gastroenterologist.

Helen and Abe would eventually move to Florida. But Helen moved back to the Washington D.C. area in 2000, after Abe passed away, so that she could be close to her children and grandchildren. Helen volunteers at the membership and donors desk, where you will find her on Thursdays. She also speaks frequently to groups here at the museum about her experience as a survivor in the Holocaust. Just recently, Helen spoke at George Mason University in Virginia. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Helen Goldkind.

[APPLAUSE]

Slide in. That's perfect, right there.

OK.

Helen, welcome. And thank you so very much for agreeing to be our First Person today. It's good to have you here.

Thank you.

Helen, when Czechoslovakia was partitioned and then occupied by Hungary, you were living in your hometown of Volosyanka. Your family had lived there for several generations. Perhaps we can begin today with you telling us what you can about your early life, your family, and your community before war began.

OK. My early years were very, very happy because I lived between uncles and aunts. And we were seven children, and it was really wonderful. And the Czechs didn't-- they weren't antisemitic. Matter of fact, my uncle was a big Czech officer. I have some pictures of him. But of course, it's hard to show it to everybody.

And I went to school with the rest of the kids. My neighbors children were my friends. But I can go on and go on, but I know this is only an hour's session.

Before you go on, Helen, you had told me that you your town had a beautiful synagogue. Tell us about your synagogue.

Well, our synagogue was just a gorgeous, gorgeous synagogue made out of stone. And most of the weddings and all these things had surrounded around the synagogue. And of course, my family was very religious family, so the synagogue was a big impact in my life.

Helen, you came from a family with-- you had a number of siblings, as we noted earlier. Did you also have a large extended family?

Of course. My mother had six brothers and two sisters. And they were all married. And they all had children. And they lived around us. And matter of fact, I had one aunt that was born in America. And she got caught in Europe.

I had grandparents. My grandfather was 86 years old. And my grandmother was 83 years old. And we really had-- I had a very, very happy family and a life.

And a very close-knit family.

Very close-knit family.

Helen, when Hungary occupied Volosyanka, you and your families and neighbors lived under Hungarian rule for several years. Please, tell us what you can about what you remember about the changes that occurred once the Hungarians took control of your part of Czechoslovakia.

Well, the first thing I remember is because when I went to school. I went to school, and I was ordered to sit in the back. And even we tried to know the lessons for tomorrow, the teacher never called on us. It just happened, like, overnight. My friends sort of got alienated from me. And that really hurt me because I was just a child.

So many things have happened. The synagogues were closed because Jews couldn't gather. So my grandfather, he was such an old man, and a very, very-- he believed in God, and he only lived to serve God. So he went, and he took a chance. And he got a Torah scroll out of the synagogue.

So his house became like a house of worship. And our-- my father got a Jewish teacher, which was fired. And he stayed with us for a-- and then after a while, most of the Jewish kids came to our house. And our house became like a school for the Jewish kids. And that went on for some times. My father had a Bata store, and they took it away from him, because it was a franchise. And a Jew couldn't own a franchise store.

When you say a Bata, this was a shoe-- basically a shoe store.

A shoe store, yeah. They called it Bata.

Bata, OK.

Yeah. And life was very hard and difficult, but we were still together. But they only took away my two brothers to-- they called it Munkator, a work camp. So my mother missed--

The Hungarians did that. They took the two boys.

The Hungarians did. And so my mother I remember crying all the time because if she didn't hear from them, she wondered what happened to them. And that was under the Hungarians. Life was difficult.

I remember-- it sounds like nothing, but I remember my uncle gave me a quarter to go and get ice cream. And when I got to the store, usually I would get the ice cream if I had a quarter. And when I got to the store, he looked at me and he says to me, you can't get the ice cream because you're Jewish. And I walked home crying. As a child I didn't understand what this man is talking.

And this was a story that you had been to many times, the same store. Right?

Yeah. Well, I didn't go too many times. I didn't have too many quarters.

[LAUGHTER]

But it was a place that was familiar to you and a shopkeeper that was.

Yes. I knew the shopkeeper. I played with his children.

Well, I just can't imagine how hurtful that must have been.

Very hurt. I wanted the ice cream, and then I couldn't figure myself out.

Helen, you've told us that your father had his business taken away from him. During that time, once that was gone, how did-- do you know how your family made ends meet?

Well, my grandparents had some cows. And they were making their own butter and cheeses. And they helped out a lot. And my father had to do all kinds of work that he usually didn't do to survive. We barely survived, but we survived with my grandparents' help.

Helen, that of course, that period in the Hungarians, I think to all of us sounds like a really dreadful time. But it would turn far worse. Eventually the Germans would occupy all of the land that had been Czechoslovakia, including that that the Hungarians controlled, where your hometown was. By that time, you were an early teenager. Tell us what changed and what life was like once the Germans took control.

Oh, my God. [SIGHS] When the Germans got to our town, they ordered all the Jewish homes should have a Star of David on these homes. We couldn't go out of our house, only at a certain time. But the time we could go out, the stores were empty. And it was a hard time.

The Jews were kept on being beaten up. And there was no place to go in case they found-- like for instance, if a German walked, the Jew had to-- you know, on the sidewalk, the Jew had to go on the street. And even so, they were after him and they were beating him up. It was a terrible time. It was a terrible time.

Helen, so in addition to having to wear the star--

--of David on my--

--you were forced to put it on your homes as well.

Right. Right.

Tell us about your grandfather. Tell us, if you don't mind. I know it's a very painful memory.

It is. Well, the Germans gave an order that all the Jews should pack up. And they can take a small suitcase with them. And my grandfather, being that he was so religious, he wanted his Torah scroll. So my grandmother went and took the Torah scroll and put a sheet on it. And he had a Torah scroll. And my grandmother managed to put a few of his things in her little suitcase because she couldn't have two little suitcase.

And they told us that we're being relocated because, at that time, Germany almost conquered Europe. So we figured it makes sense. And they took us to a ghetto. When we got to the ghetto, a few days later they ordered the old men to get to the square. And what they did is they were cutting their beards and they were beating them up.

My mother went with my grandfather, but she couldn't help him because they probably would beat him worse or beat my mother or whatever. So she had to stand by and see her 86-year-old father was beaten up and cutting his beard. Finally, when they got finished with these older men, my mother brought him there where we were in the ghetto. And he was black and blue, without a beard.

I have never seen my father cry, never in all these years. But that night, everyone's sitting all around him, and he was just crying. We tried talking to him, and he wouldn't answer. He was like in a shock. And that went on for a few days.

And my mother didn't know what to do with him, so she took a kerchief and she wrapped around his face. And he was just very quiet, didn't answer and didn't talk and didn't eat. So finally a few days later-- excuse me. Thank you.

A few days later, he told my mother that he heard us say that he's probably in pain and all. But he says, no, the humiliation that they did to him was the biggest pain of his. And in no, no time, maybe five, six days later, they took us to the trains. It's just that I just wondered why this cruelty to my grandfather took place when they knew-- I'm sure they knew where he's going to wind up.

As you said, to entire-- to totally humiliate him and all of your community.

Yes. And of course, he was beaten up. He was black and blue. Excuse me. I just want to talk a little--

Oh, please, Helen. Can you say any more about the life in the ghetto, when they moved you into the Uzhhorod ghetto? What were the-- I mean, you've told us about that, which probably tells us everything. But tell us a little bit more about the life in the ghetto for the time you were there.

Well, the time we were there, we had to sleep on the floors. And they would give us-- like in the morning, they would give us coffee. And at night they would give us a little soup. But we didn't know what they going to do with us. Nobody

was talking to us, what will happen. So life was very difficult.

I had a little brother, and he loved books. So he threw himself into the books. But there was really nothing else to do. You were like in a jail and didn't know what next hour will bring.

This is your brother, Efram?

Efram, yeah. Yeah.

Helen, it wouldn't be long before, as you started to tell us, that you were deported from the ghetto and sent to Auschwitz. Will you tell us about going to Auschwitz and, as best you can, what happened once you got there?

[SIGHS] They put us into cattle cars. And they really packed this cattle car in full. There was kids, and there were sick people. There were old people. And they gave us bucket of water. But when you have close to 100 people-- I don't know exactly how many there were, but there were a lot. We finished the water, and then people were using it for different things. And it was-- on the way, it was very-- the smell and everything else.

And there was no place to sit down because the older people were fainting, and the younger ones would get up and just let them lay there. So we really couldn't wait to get out of these cattle cars. So finally, when we got out of the cattle-- actually, it was like late afternoon when we got to Auschwitz. We saw the sign, Arbeit macht das leben free. Can you-- work makes life free.

So we figured, well, maybe we came on the farm. So we had to wait until it got dark. Then all of a sudden, we saw floodlights come on. And there were dogs. And there were these SS with rubber hoses. And there was a man in black. Now I know he was Mengele.

So finally, while we were yet in the cattle car, there was a terrible, terrible smell, like burning flesh. So we wondered, what is this? What happened was, when we got to Auschwitz, they were capable of gassing 10,000 people a day. And they couldn't burn them. So what they did is they made a big pit, and they threw the bodies into that pit. And that was a terrible, terrible smell.

That was even when we were in the cattle cars. This is what hit us.

Helen, when did you realize what that was?

Well, you got to realize that we didn't have any information.

Right.

This thing has never happened in history. There were wars before us, wars now, and I think there was going to be wars after us. But something like this, to take 11 million-- a million and a half kids to a gas chamber, innocent, but that never happened that you could study about it. We didn't have no radios. I think--

And you had had no inkling of what was in store for you, none.

No. No. But the truth is-- I can talk about it now. I think everybody knew, but the victims didn't. Because when we were going-- when we were going with the cars, there is little windows in these cattle cars. And my sister looked out, and people were working on farms, and they were making like this. But we still didn't understand what they're talking about.

We sort of like dismissed it. You don't want to think. So anyway, they opened the cattle cars. And they told us, heraus, heraus. So we were all-- took our little suitcases. My grandfather took his Torah scroll. And they told us left and right. And then-- if you don't mind, I'm going to call him a monster.

That seems fitting.

He walked over to my-- he walked over to my grandfather, and he says throw down the Torah scrolls. And he wouldn't throw it down. And he--

And you're all watching this?

Yes. And my mother ran over to him. And she says, please throw down the Torah scrolls because he was already getting beaten up from that monster. And he wouldn't. And he fell on the ground. And then they told us to run right, and my mother still held on to my little brother. And I don't know why I looked back. And I saw he was already on the ground, and they were still hitting him. I just don't know why.

And I couldn't scream. So-- [GASPS] so a noise like this came out of me. I think I scared everybody that was near me. I couldn't explain it, what. So my mother held on to my brother, and he loved books. And then in Europe, people weren't so rich that they could buy toys. I don't remember ever having a toy. But on occasions, my parents bought us books.

So he was holding onto this book. But my mother was afraid that he's going to get beaten up if he holds the book. So she was negotiating with him to throw down the book, and he couldn't understand it. He was only six years old. And finally my mother made him to understand.

So he goes and takes the book and gives it to his mother. And he was watching her. My mother is throwing that book into the ditch. And he started screaming and crying. But she was still holding onto him. And a monster came, and he just pulled him away.

And as he was pulling him away, the kid was crying louder. And my mother saw what was happening, so she was running to my brother. And she was begging these monsters to let her go to her son. And she was saying, he's only six years old. And they wouldn't. So they were beating her up, and she fell. And they were kicking her around.

And finally she got herself up from the ground. And these monsters pushed her to the left, and she went with my brother. And of course, they were telling me and my sister to go to the right. I had an 18-year-old sister. She really should have lived instead of me because-- and because she held on to my grandmother, then she just walked weight to the left.

Was it just and your other sister?

At that time, just me and my sister was left.

And at the time, of course, you did not know where they were all going.

I'll tell you, the atmosphere was so that, even though a person doesn't want to admit to themselves that this is the end, but it was saying something to us.

And what did they do with you and your sister then, Helen?

OK. After the selection, we were about-- I don't know exactly how many, but I'm just guessing-- maybe 2,000 young people. And they told us to march. And as we were marching, on both sides there were flowerbeds and trees, on both sides. And far away, there was music, like an orchestra of music playing. And we just walked.

So we got there. And while we were walking, to tell you the truth, we didn't realize that back of this, my family and my people are being gassed. We didn't know it. I really think the world knew it. It's just that we didn't know it. I didn't know it. I didn't know it.

They got us into showers. They shaved our heads and gave us showers and gave us one striped dress and wooden clogs and a bowl. And then finally, when they got finished with all the girls, they marched us back to-- they marched us to a barrack. We wound up in a barrack.

And I happened to be on the top, on the top. There were three bunk beds.

Three bunk beds stacked up, and you were on the top?

Yeah. There were six in one bunk bed. And I couldn't sleep. And I took-- there was a crack, and I took a look out. And I saw people hanging on the wire fence. At that time, I didn't know it's an electric fence. So I said to my sister, look, there's something is wrong here. The people are hanging on the wire fence. And it was during the day.

So she said, well, tomorrow they might let us out, and we'll see. In the meantime, these fences were-- these people were electrocuted. They tried to run away or they were desperate, and they thought maybe they'll make it. And they just got caught.

They didn't take them off. They didn't take him off because they wanted the people to see. Don't try, you're not going to make it. But after a while, there were so many that they had a work crew there. And they came with pitchforks. And they were taking them off the fence.

Because if they would have touched them, I think they would have gotten electrocuted. That's why they-- that's why they picked the-- that's why they were taking them off with the pitchforks. OK.

Helen, you and Sylvia are still together. And now you would be selected to go into slave labor. Tell us what happened to you once you were selected for slave labor.

OK. When we were selected to slave labor, they put us again in cattle cars. But it was a little better. They gave us water. And they also gave us a piece of bread. So then when we got into the cattle car, they locked us up again from the outside. And we were standing there.

All of a sudden, we heard noises, like bombs are falling. We were so happy because I thought they came to bomb the tracks because I had lots of cousins yet there in Uzhhorod, and aunts, that they're not going to be able to get to Auschwitz, that they'll survive. Or we were hoping that the train should be bombed because we really didn't think of tomorrow. We didn't think we'll survive tomorrow.

But unfortunately, after, I would say, 45 minutes or an hour, the train took off. And it took us to Germany. And first they took us to the factory that we worked. And when we got there, you were assigned where you're going to work. Somehow, I had a very tough place to work in at machine that was filling bombs with gunpowder.

With gunpowder?

With gunpowder. And this gunpowder, I had to pick up an empty shell, put it on this machine, and fill it, and then with my whole body put it into another wagon. And our bodies got yellow. Our eyes were reddish, and our-- well, we didn't have much hair, but whatever it was, it was like orangey.

From the chemicals.

I think so. And during the night-- there were two shifts, a day shift and a night shift. And the day shift was a little better because they opened up the doors. But the night shift was bad because they closed the doors, and the girls were just fainting from the gunpowder, from the close quarters. And a lot of them died out there. Yeah. So that's what we were doing.

So your job, if you could call it that, was to fill these large shells, lift them, fill them. And how many hours a day were you forced to do that?

I don't even remember. We left early in the morning from the barracks. And we didn't get home until late at night. You know, I didn't have a clock to see exactly how many hours.

But you're marched early morning?

Yes.

Then marched late at night back.

Late at night, yes.

Day in, day out.

Day in and day out. And I'll tell you, there in Europe it was cold. And then it started snowing. And we would lose our clogs. So some girls were lucky, and they found a piece of string. And they would tie these clogs so that at least they don't get off their feet. Or some of them, if they had another piece, they would tie it around their waist. And if they would find a piece of paper, they would put it in their dress so they're not so cold. You know?

It was very hard. And a lot of them were dying. And it was just a matter of time.

And the barracks, they would put you in barracks there. You'd return to barracks at night, and very crowded conditions there. And what would they feed you?

Well, in the morning, we would get coffee. And at night, we would get soup. And of course, after a while, you use out your energy and you become very tired. And you can't make it to this factory. So I already was so tired and so hungry and so cold.

One day I decided I will stay in the barrack. A lot of girls did, and then they did away with them. And I don't know what happened to them, but we never saw them before. I said to myself, I'm not going to make it to this factory. I just won't go out to the Zahlappell.

So I was laying there, and my sister noticed that I wasn't there. So she came running in. And she picked me up, and she shook me. And I thought she went crazy. And she-- then we all both cried. And she says to me, I know you're tired and hungry. But you know, remember we have to live through this so we can tell the world. The world doesn't know.

And she had this willpower to live. But I couldn't make it. So she says to me, OK, Helen, I'm going to give you a piece of bread of mine. And you'll see you'll make it. So she did that for a while. She did that for a while. But then I was scared that she's going to die on me, and I didn't want to be left alone. So I didn't take it.

But at night, if I got a potato in the soup, I would give her half. And if she would get a potato, she would give me half. And that's how we went on.

Just continued to support each other through that.

Support each other, yes. And she-- I don't think I would have made it without her because the will wasn't there. It was very weak. Yeah.

Helen, at some point after all of that, you would then be forced to leave, and they would send you to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp towards the end of the war. Tell us about that trip to Bergen-Belsen and, after all you've been through, what it was like to go to Bergen-Belsen.

[SIGHS] We were locked in from the outside, and we took a look. It's already daylight. And nobody came to open the doors. And at that time, we saw civilians are opening up the doors. And they said we no longer need you here. We're going to take you to another place. They never mentioned Bergen-Belsen, not that it would register. I didn't know.

And there was-- with a half a truck-- you know what a half a truck? I don't know how many girls there were left out of

the 2,000. Not too many, not too many, they died out, so maybe 500. I'm just guessing. And we went on this open truck. And they took us to Bergen-Belsen.

And there was a sign, Bergen-Belsen, but it didn't register. So when they took us in, they opened up-- they opened up a barrack. And they told us to go in there. Well, this barrack already-- and that was in the end. That was in the end. And this barrack was so full of people that were delirious and dead ones and full of lice, full of insects. There was no place to sit down.

So my sister says to me-- there were some dead people over there, and my sister says, OK, let's move the dead people here and make a wall. And we're going to sit there in that corner. And I thought maybe it was a good idea because it was dirty people.

So we did that. And we sat in that corner. And nobody opened the door. We were just waiting for our death there. And all of a sudden, a few days later, a few days later, somebody is opening up the doors. And it was the English soldiers.

And I'm telling you, Bill, nobody was happy because everybody was half dead there. We didn't have the energy to be happy. And we felt, for us it's so little too late. So finally, when the soldiers opened these barracks, they didn't know what it was. So they probably called Eisenhower because Eisenhower came to look at this disaster, piles and piles of dead ones.

Finally, my sister, my strong sister, got sick. And they were trying to save her. So they took her away in an ambulance, these makeshift ambulances. They took her away, and I'm here alone. So one day, I figured I'm going to go and look for her. I'll find her. And as I was walking, I saw a big mountain there, and it was moving.

I knew in me mountains don't move. But I think, at that time, I was already so sick. And as I was getting closer, I realized that it was bodies, a mountain with bodies. But the lice and the insects were crawling around.

Crawling on the bodies.

Yeah. And to me, it looked like the mountain was crawling. And evidently, a short time later I must have just fallen there on the street because I don't remember. I don't remember. And they must have picked me up because I still had a heartbeat. I looked like a skeleton, but I had a heartbeat. And these people must have noticed that I must have moved something. And they came and they picked me up. And they took me into a makeshift hospital.

I didn't know where I was. And for some times--

And you didn't know where Sylvia was, of course, at that time. Did you know?

No. I thought she's dead, seeing all these dead people. And they kept me there in this makeshift hospital. And after a while, I was somehow alive. And I pulled myself up by my elbows. And I was looking for my sister's face. And I didn't see her.

And then I realized I'm here by myself again. So I started crying. And the nurse came over to me, and she said, why are you crying? You're feeling better. I knew I was feeling better because I could lift my head. But this is not what I wanted. And she didn't see her.

She says, why are you crying? I says, you know, I came with my sister to Bergen-Belsen, and then she died here. She says, well, how do you know? I says, I lifted my head. I don't see her face. I didn't know that there were other makeshift hospitals at that time. I thought if she's not there-- I remember white sheets. I remember dead people, but I never remembered white sheets. I saw white sheets.

And she says, don't cry. Don't cry. Tell me her name. And I told her. And she says, don't cry. We'll find her. And she says to me, we would like you to live. I says, you know, my life is not worth living anymore. I mean, I think that would be better. I'm sorry.

Oh, and Helen, would you mind, before we come back to Sylvia, would you mind telling us about Freddie?

Oh, my God. I'm going to have a--

Yes.

I'm sorry. [SIGHS] I had a cousin, Freddie. And matter of fact, he's my age. And as I was walking to look for my sister, I saw the Germans were cleaning the bodies. And I saw a German dragging a body by the feet, by the ankles with a rope.

Pulling him along with a rope. OK.

Yeah. And I looked down, and he had big ears. And he looked like Freddie. And I says, Freddie! Freddie! And he opened his eyes. It's like a dead person opens his eyes. And the German took off the ropes, and he went away.

He was hauling him off because he thought he was dead. And you called his name, and Freddie opens his eyes.

He opened his eyes. I think that German must have gotten scared himself.

[LAUGHTER]

But he left. And he-- I don't know. I don't know what happened. But the bottom line is that he was in Bergen-Belsen, but he doesn't remember anything. He doesn't remember the German dragged him. So I really don't remember.

But he survived.

He survived.

And he became very close to you for years and years, right?

Right. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. That was really-- because the Germans used to, when they would clean these skeletons-- I remember one time, he picked that skeleton up and put it on his shoulder. And I was so close that the skeleton let water out. It almost hit me. If I would be maybe 10 inches closer, the water from the skeleton--

Helen, you would be reunited with Sylvia. Tell us how that happened and what that was like for you.

Well, what happened was I really wanted to die, and I didn't want to eat. So they went to work on it really.

To find Sylvia?

To find Sylvia. So they did find her a few days later, a few days later. And they came and told me that they found her but she's very sick. I was looking at her, and I couldn't believe it. But in a way, you always hope for the best. I says, OK, maybe she is alive.

And then I was very sick too. They couldn't move me either. So a week or two later, they brought her to my barrack. And that's how we got reunited. And I tell her the story I saw Freddie. She says, oh, you were delirious. It wasn't--

She didn't believe that.

No. I tell you the truth, I don't know what. [LAUGHS] But that's what happened. Yeah.

Helen, eventually you would come under the-- you were with the British, but you would come under the care of the Swedish.

That's another story.

Will you tell us just a little bit about that before we get ready to close?

OK. When I was in the hospital, the Swedish Red Cross came and took out 600 survivors. And now I believe they must have-- you know, the olders were dying anyway. There were 17,000 people died after the war, after the liberation. So they were picking out kids that-- I had a heartbeat in me, but they felt maybe I'll survive it because I was younger.

And they took me and my sister and 600 kids to Sweden. And then in Sweden they put me in a sanitarium. And they kept me in the sanitarium for two months. And then they couldn't work me because I was underaged, and they put me in a school.

But they were so nice to me. Oy, God, watch over these Swedes. I'll tell you-- I'll tell you, it was such a shock because they were so kind to me. And here I came where monsters were hitting on me. So it was like a different world. I mean, the Swedes were like I knew human beings are. But I didn't human beings can be like monsters. But that's how they dealt with the world.

So I was in Sweden. And then there was an organization, and they knew I have-- nobody had anybody in Europe. And I had a sister that came out in '38.

To the United States?

To the United States. And then they asked me, where does she live? Well, at that time, her name was Lebowitz. I says, you'll never find her because--

I'm smiling because of what you told me about finding her in "Brookleen."

Yeah. So I says, I have a sister in "Brookleen." I called it "Brookleen."

And they didn't know where that was, right?

So anyway, they put an ad in the paper, in a Brooklyn paper. And they found me. My sister found me. But she couldn't figure out why I am in Sweden because I lived in Czechoslovakia. So she called the Red Cross. And, yeah, they says there are two girls from Czechoslovakia, but they're here because they're very sick. So that's how she found out that we are here, that we were in Sweden.

And she sent us papers because at that time, you couldn't come-- only if you?

Right.

But you know, I had such a tough time because, having a family and then all of a sudden not having anybody. So the girls that were in my bunk there-- not in a bunk, it was a house. There were 10 of us. We became sisters. We really felt close. And we says, when are we going to go? Now I will be alone. At least I have 10 sisters. But my sister says, look, we'll go to America. She's our real sister. And if we don't like it, we'll be in touch with these girls, and we'll go to them.

So you made it to the United States in 1946. We don't have the time, of course, today, but some of what Helen shared with me about getting adjusted to the United States and getting situated and remarkable, remarkable things that you went through and just going through and getting adjusted, then meeting your husband and starting a new life here. We have time for maybe one or two questions from you before we close our program. And I think we have a first volunteer over here.

And remember, I'll repeat the question before Helen responds.

Were you religious? And if so, how did your experience affect that?

Question for Helen is were you religious, and how did what you experienced during the Holocaust affect your religious views?

OK. I was very religious. I really was. And at that-- right now, how I feel about it, I'll tell you the truth. I'm a stronger Jew. And therefore, the Jews were persecuted for the last 2,000 years, and I'm sure you know that. So now I have sort of the allegiance to Israel. Of course, I like the United States. But I replaced my religion with believing that we Jews need a country. And that's the only way to survive.

If at that time, they would have Israel, they wouldn't have built gas chambers. You got to realize, right now there are so many people that come from these Arab countries. And they have where to go. We had no place to go. So this is where I am today.

OK. Do we have another one? We have a young man, I think, back here in a green shirt it looks like.

How long were you in the concentration camps?

The question is how long were you in the camps, between Auschwitz, the labor camp, and then Bergen-Belsen.

What was it, a year and a half, close to two, something like that?

Almost two years.

Almost two years, yes.

OK. Gentleman here.

I just want to say thank you for sharing and ask you, because of your experience during the Holocaust, how has that affected your politics?

Politics?

[LAUGHTER]

If it has?

The question is-- and we won't spend too long on this, but the question is how has it affected your politics?

Well, here I'm sitting in the Holocaust museum, and I'm not speaking for the Holocaust museum. But I choose not to go into politics because you can turn my words that that's the Holocaust-- that's the Holocaust policy. So I sort of want to be quiet about politics because I'm sitting here. Ask me outside on the street.

And you-- and you and you will have--

[LAUGHTER AND APPLAUSE]

--and you will have that opportunity before we wrap up. Helen will be available, if you don't mind, for just a little bit outside. Maybe people can come and ask you questions.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

And I think you have a hunch, she has some strong convictions.

[LAUGHTER]

But there is a young man.

Yes, sir, right there in the blue.

Were you the younger or the older of the seven kids?

The question is, where were you age-wise with your siblings?

I was the sixth one, honey.

Sixth one.

Yeah, there was my little brother that perished, that didn't-- I was the sixth one.

And only you and Sylvia survived.

Survived.

Yeah.

Everybody else didn't.

I wish we had-- we've got one more, gentleman with the hat on.

Have you kept in contact with any other survivors through the years?

The question is, have you kept in contact with the other survivors, that you were with, over the years?

Some. But you know, right now a lot of us are not here anymore because the age. And of course, what we had to go through didn't help. So some that are survivors and still alive, I try to. Yeah.

I wish we had more time. We need to wrap up the program now. And hold on for just a moment. I'm going to turn it back to Helen to close our program, but just a couple of comments. One, I want to thank all of you for being here and, of course, thank Helen for being our First Person. I'd like to remind you that we will have a First Person program each Wednesday through the 29th of August, except for next Wednesday, the 1st of August. So our next First Person will be on August 8, when our first person will be Mr. Isaac Danon, who is from Yugoslavia.

Mr. Danon's hometown fell under the control of Italians early in the war. In 1943, after the fall of Mussolini, Isaac and his father were forced to flee their town as German troops advanced. They traveled with partisans through the mountains, eventually reuniting with his mother and two sisters. And in 1944, Isaac and his family came to the US, and Isaac would then join the United States Army.

So I hope that you can join us again for another First Person. Look for the First Person program next year. If you come to Washington DC, come here on a Wednesday for a First Person. With that, I'd like to let you know it is our tradition that our First Person has the last word. And with that, I'd like to turn it back to Helen to close our program and remind you that, if you want to chat with her afterwards, we'll do so up the stairs outside. Thank you.

Well first, I really want to thank you for coming and listening to such a sad story. It is very difficult for me to sit here and reminisce because the whole thing comes in front of me. But I think it's very important because you see hatred all over the place. And we need to not to be prejudice and not to hate.

Some people will ask me, do you hate the Germans? I do hate these monsters, what they did to my family. I do hate

them. I hope they stay in hell forever. But you've got to realize, there are new Germans now. And hate breeds hate. So I feel like I did forgive them.

But young kids like this, the reason why I picked them, is because they should be careful. They shouldn't join hate groups. And of course, we should accept everybody the way what we are, the way we are because we are all Gods children. And God bless you all.

[APPLAUSE]