

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.

It is with great pleasure that we start our ninth year of First Person today. And our first "first person" for 2008 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 experiences associated with the Holocaust. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. With few exceptions, we will have a First Person guest each Wednesday through August 27, and this year we will also have a First Person program on Thursdays in June and July. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a list of upcoming First Person guests. Just click on First Person on the home page. This 2008 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 a few questions of Erika.

Before you're introduced to her, I have a few requests of you, and a couple of announcements. First, if it's at all possible, please stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions while Erika is speaking.

Second, if we do have time for the question and answer period, and you have a question-- and we hope that you will-- please make your question as brief as possible. I will repeat the question so all in the room, including Erika, hear the question, and then she'll respond to it.

Finally, we would ask that if you have a cell phone or a pager that's not yet been turned off, please do so.

I'd like to let those of you who have passes for the permanent exhibition this afternoon know that they are good for the entire afternoon. So you can stay with us till the end of the program, and then go to the permanent exhibition, if that's your plan.

In January, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum announced that it began providing information to Holocaust survivors and their families from the International Tracing Service, or ITS, archive. Located in Germany, the archive was the largest closed Holocaust archive in the world, containing information on approximately 17.5 million victims of the Nazis, both Jews and non-Jews. After years of effort, the archive has been opened to the museum. The ITS material is being transferred in digital form to the museum in a series of installments, the first of which arrived in August 2007. More information on the ITS collection can be found on the museum's website, or by visiting the museum's Benjamin and Vladka Registry of Holocaust Survivors, located in the Wexner Learning Center on the second floor.

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored systematic persecution, 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 Eric 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 Dolly and Ephraim Neuman. Here we see Dolly and Ephraim with their daughters Erika and Beatrice in this photo taken between 1933 and 1934.

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

Erika's father, Ephraim, poses, with the students of the Stanesti Hebrew School, which he founded. Erika, Beatrice, and Ephraim, are in this photo and our circle is around Erika. Erika also attended public school.

Here we have a portrait of the Neuman family in a garden seated from left to right are Feige Pesie Neuman, Erika's mother, and her grandfather, Abraham Neuman, and Feige Pesie Neuman is her grandmother. Standing to the left to right are Max Neuman, Dolly Neuman, and Ephraim Neuman.

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 a photo of the official identification card bearing a large yellow star issued by the county office of the Jews to Czernowitz-- of Czernowitz, to Erika Neuman-- Erika Eckstut-- authorizing her to remain in Czernowitz rather than be deported in 1942.

In this photo, we see Erika reading a magazine in the Czernowitz Ghetto between 1942 and 1943. In 1943, Erika and her sister Beatrice escaped from the ghetto on false papers that their father had obtained. After escaping to the Soviet Union, Erika and Beatrice returned to Czechoslovakia, where they were eventually reunited with their parents.

We close with this wedding portrait from Erika's wedding to Robert Kauder, an officer in the Czech army, on August 28, 1945. Erika and Robert would have two children. She eventually immigrated to the United States in 1960.

With that-- excuse me. One more thing to say about Erika, and to bring you up to date on her life, today, Erika lives here in the Washington, DC area with her husband Donnie. And Donnie if you wouldn't mind, a little wave so folks know you're here.

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

[APPLAUSE]

Erika, thank you so much for your willingness to be our first "first person" of 2008. It's really a pleasure to have you with us on this program today.

Erika, you were born in a small town in Czechoslovakia, and then your family moved to another small town but in Romania, when you were very young. 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, please tell us a bit about your family, and your early years, what your life was like before the war began for you?

In 19-- about '31 or '32, we left the Czech Republic and we went to Romania to be with my grandparents. My father wanted to take the whole family to Palestine, because he felt that Hitler is coming to power, and it won't be good for the Jews.

And so we went there. At that time I was about three years old or whatever. And I really don't even remember how we went. I just know it from listening to my mother and my sister when they talked about our trip. And I met my grandparents.

And when I could really remember already things-- I was about four or five. And when I was six I started to go to

Hebrew school and to regular school. And I liked it very, very much, because there were children in one school, in the other school, and I could play with all the children, and I really liked it.

When I went to the regular school, I saw a lot of children which I liked, and I asked everybody their name. And then, all of a sudden, a lady came in, and she said, you will have to sit down. We'll start now the school. I said, you know, I still have about three children and I didn't ask their name. She says you'll have to do it later.

So I sat down, and the school started. And I loved the teacher. And I really liked it very much.

And I also was in the Hebrew school. In the Hebrew school, it wasn't really a law, but every time we finished the year, we had a little-- people would-- we would have a little story, and we would also learn a poem, whatever we had, a nice little thing.

But what I didn't tell you, which I should have said before, is that we were all together four people. I had one sister who was older than me, my father, and my mother. And of course, I had a lot of uncles, aunts, and cousins, and all. And when I came to Romania, I also had their cousins and aunts and all. And it was very, very nice.

I absolutely adored my grandfather. I liked my grandmother too, but my grandfather would take me to the horse, and the cow, and the chickens, and I liked it.

When my father told him that the reason he came, that he wanted to take us all to Palestine, my grandfather said that was a very good idea. But you will have to have somebody who will take my horse, my cow, and the chickens. But my father couldn't get anybody who would take a horse, cows, and chickens. So we didn't go anywhere.

And my father got a job, a very good job. He became-- like, he was the mayor of the whole town. It wasn't a mayor. It was a big, a big thing, a big name. But I forgot Romanian. I don't even remember how it was written. But--

But he became a very distinguished man of the town.

Yeah, he was very, very, very, very well liked. And we had a very nice, very nice life.

Tell us a little bit more about your father. He was, if I remember correctly, he was a veteran of the First World War.

Yeah. And he was wounded very badly. And he walked with a cane, because he had a lot of operations, and he couldn't walk. But he was very, very kind, very, very nice. It was the nicest man I have ever, ever met.

And we-- my grandfather was also a very nice man, and we had a little problems between my father and my grandfather because my sister was a very good girl, but she liked to read. I didn't like to read. I liked to be with my grandfather, with a cow and the horse and all that. That gave me a lot of pleasure.

And my father didn't agree with my grandfather when I told him the boys don't want to play with me. He said, you give them a few, and they will play. My father was very upset about it. He said, you don't give nobody nothing. You can't take the law in your own hands, and you don't do that.

Where did you hear that? I didn't tell him where I heard it, because I didn't want my grandfather to get into trouble. But I really and truly loved everybody, and I had a good time.

You described yourself to me as a "wild duck."

Yeah, that's what I was. I Was a wild duck. I was a very big tomboy, a very, very big tomboy.

And the boys did play with me eventually. And they made me the princess of-- I don't know what the game was. And they tied me to a tree, and they never came to get me.

[LAUGHTER]

And I screamed and screamed. My grandfather came and he got me loose from the-- I never wanted to play with them again. That was the end of my playing with the boys.

Your father, you told me, was-- education was very important to him.

Yes.

And it was really important to him that every time you read a story--

Oh, yeah. That was terrible. We didn't have-- of course, I wasn't a 12-year-old like today, who knows everything more than I have ever known. But I was a 12-year-old who didn't really know much about life or so on.

And we went to the movies. When I came home, my father said, can you tell me what was the moral of the story? I couldn't say nothing. I had to think about it for an hour, to figure out what was the moral of the story. Took me always forever.

When I read a book, and I finished, can you tell me what was the moral of the story. That was another hour. And the hours went by like. That my father never, ever-- or my mother never ever-- hit me, but they always wanted to know what was the moral of the story. And it took me so long to find that out.

Well, I intend to start doing that with my children.

[LAUGHS]

Erika, you've described your life a bit to us and to me. You said in so many ways it was a wonderful young life.

Very nice.

But of course, when the Germans entered your town, life for you and for your community changed dramatically and immediately. And I know that you have strong memories of what you saw. Will you tell us what happened to your family and to you when the Germans did occupy your town?

Yeah. You see, first, before the Germans came, the army, the Romanian army, was almost like the German army. And they didn't like the Jews. And they didn't like if they had a good job. And my father had the best job you could have.

So they actually said that my father used a gun in the case when he goes to the court, which wasn't true. But my father didn't look for a lawyer. He took his own case, and he won, and he was reinstated, and everything was all right.

And then, in 1940-- that was in 1937-- in 1940, that was when the-- when the Romanian said that they are going to fight with the Germans. That was when the Russians came, and they occupied us. And when they occupied us, I remember we were all so scared of them. And we had to learn Russian very, very well, because every language, every thing we had, was everything taught in Russian, and we really didn't know any Russian.

And Russian wasn't exactly like Czech. I mean, it was also a language similar. But even the alphabet wasn't the same like the Czech. And, I mean it was in Romanian, not the Czech.

I always said when I was about four years old, I said, I'm really a genius, because I speak three languages. I spoke Romanian. I went to school and I learned. And I spoke Czech. And my mother's tongue was German, because my mother was from Vienna. And she taught us German.

How well I spoke all the languages, I really don't know. But I know I spoke them all. So I always made a lot-- I always told everybody that I was very, very smart.

And that was absolutely right.

[LAUGHS] I don't know if it was right, but I-- but I always told that.

And when the Russians were with us for a year-- and to be honest, I was the best student I have ever been under the Russians. And I got a big thing when I finished from Stalin and Lenin that I had all A's with a star. My father wanted to know why I got a good thing like that, because I really couldn't read very well.

And once, when I saw the principal coming to our house, I knew it's no good. And then I left. I told the girl I'll be home. And she said, you make sure you are home on time. I said, oh, yes, I will.

When I came home, we had dinner. And after dinner my father said, would you please bring the book and read to me. I said, we don't have the new book for the second grade. We still have from the first. He said, that's all right. You can bring that.

He opened the book, and I had to read. But I couldn't. I mean, first I read wonderful. Every thing I he gave me I read. Then he closed it, opened again. I read it beautiful.

And my father checked if I-- everything was great. And he did it about two or three times. And then, I don't know where he got the idea, and he put the hand where was the picture. And I had to read. And I was dead. I couldn't read at all, because I felt that I had a memory of a-- wonderful--

Like a photographic memory.

Photographic memory. Now he doesn't have a film anymore, but--

[LAUGHTER]

--at that time it was really very good. And my father took a man, and he taught me how to read. Now I read really very well. I read now well. But I didn't read well then.

So eventually, of course, the Russians would be forced out and the Germans would come in.

Yes, yes, and the Germans. And when the Russians left us, about the next day or maybe even the same day-- I can't remember-- there came three men to our place, and they said we have to go with them. My father wanted to know where we have to go. And they were not nice to my father. And they said, you will see.

And the way they treated us was really very, very bad. I don't like to really tell you how bad they were, because I don't like to make anybody cry. I cried so much.

I love to talk to children. And to me, there are here a lot of children, which I'd love to talk. But I don't like anybody to cry. I cried enough for myself and everybody else.

So when they took us, they took us outside our town, not really far. And there was a big park. And when we came there, all the people from the town were there. And they were about 500 Jews in that town.

And, like, in the middle was standing our rabbi and his two sons. And without saying anything, they killed the rabbi and his two sons. And then they took one man after another, and they killed them.

And once they started, the children all started to cry. And the adults were saying the prayer for the dead. And I felt if I lost my father, I knew my father was very smart, and he knew for sure if I will die too. And I wanted to know, am I also going to have to die?

And my father said to me-- I thought he'll have an answer, but he didn't. He just said, please don't cry. How could I not cry. Everybody cried. I mean, there was no way.

Then, after they killed almost-- I mean, almost all the men, and they took him in, and they shot him once, and they did not kill him. And when they did not kill him, they didn't have any more ammunition, they killed him by hand.

The war took four years. I had terrible, terrible nights and days. But that was the worst night I have ever, ever had.

And they killed the man also. And then they said that we are going to go to the courtroom, that there is enough room for everybody. And we have to wait until they get some more ammunition.

And so we went there. And when we came, my father didn't walk in. He stood right at the door, and he smoked. And when he stood there, he knew everybody he knew by name. A man, because the people who killed us were not in uniform.

And the man said to him, I will take you home. My father says, I'm not going go anywhere. He said, I'll take your parents too. And my father said, all right.

When we came home, the house was not the way we left it. Everything was upside down, and the books my father had in his library, they were beautiful, in leather bound and all. They were all torn pages out. It was really terrible the way it looked. And the whole house wasn't the same.

I remember I started to cry, and my grandmother too. And maybe I cried myself to sleep, because when I woke up I saw two men in the house, and they were talking with my sister, wanted to go with my father. They wanted only my father. But my sister wanted to go with them, and they did not want to take her.

Then, finally, she went with them. And they went the same way we went the night before. And when they came almost where we went the night before, my father could not remember the name of the guy. He had a gray suit on, and he said this man doesn't belong here. He's going home.

And my father came back with my sister. And when he came back, maybe an hour later, came the police chief who was the police chief before the Russians came to our place. And he said that he will take us to Czernowitz, which was the capital of Bukovina, is where we were. We were in northern Romania, and the capital was Czernowitz. And he said he's going to take us there.

And sure enough, when it got darker, my mother made packages for all of us except my father, who couldn't really carry anything. He walked with a cane. And we walked, and we came to a forest. And then the policeman left, and my father didn't feel good. So he, like, really fell down. And my mother said she's going go for some water, and my sister said she's going with her.

My grandparents started to cry, and I started to beat on my father. Please, talk to me, talk to me. And I would beat on him. Please talk to me.

And he made then with the hand, that he's all right. I should just stop beating him.

[LAUGHTER]

And I really didn't know what--

Stop the CPR.

Yeah, but I didn't know what I was doing. And then my mother came, and we made it to Czernowitz.

And in Czernowitz, maybe two days later, the ghetto came. And you saw there my ID I had. And I also have an ID for

my sister. And my mother's ID is in New York. We didn't have the IDs, because when we left the ghetto, we also left the IDs. But my mother had it. And I got it from my mother when I came to the United States.

So that's how I got my own ID. And mine is not-- I don't have the ID. I gave it to the museum. I just have a copy of it. And that's the way I had it.

But when we were in the ghetto, there was no food. There was nothing to eat and nothing to do. And of course, the people went to work. My father didn't go, because he could hardly walk. Now I can't walk either, but that's besides the point.

When-- we couldn't go to school or go out. And it was, I think, from 7:00 to 8:00 or 7:00 to 9:00-- I don't know how it was-- that the adults could go out and look for food. They didn't get much.

I remember my mother got once an egg, and she made breakfast for all six of us.

A single egg.

One single egg.

One egg.

And she made breakfast for all of us. I think it was water or whatever. I don't know. But we had all breakfast from one egg. And my father would-- and everything was against the law. Everything was against the law. And my father said that the children have to have something to learn, because if they don't learn, why should they live? And so that was against the law. And my father started to teach us.

And there were also students, and professors, and teachers were in the ghetto. And they all started to teach us. My father taught us the French Revolution. I wasn't interested in it at all. It didn't interest me. If I heard the name Napoleon, or Josephine, or Helen, nothing interested me.

When my father asked me a question, I never had an answer. And maybe it was the second or third time when my father said to me, you really hurt me very much. I says, what did I do? She said-- he said to me, you never have an answer.

I said, I can't. I am so hungry, all I think of is a piece of bread. He said, don't you think that the other kids are hungry too. I said, maybe they're not as hungry as I am.

But you see, it bothered me, because I was a tomboy, a very big tomboy. But I loved my family really very, very much. And I didn't like what I did to my father. So I took the ID. And the star, we had to wear it on the coat. I took that off my coat. And I left that where I slept-- we slept on the floor-- under a pillow or whatever I had there. And I walked out.

Walked out of the ghetto.

Of the ghetto. You see, my mother used to talk to the ladies. And I heard that my father had a friend who became a Greek Orthodox preacher-- preacher or whatever it is. And I knew his name. So I walked out. I didn't have any money or whatever. And I went to a place which I heard them talk that there was a place where they sold for nuns and for people who were with the church.

So I went there, and I bought a--

So it was a store that served only nuns and priests.

Yeah, only nuns and priests. That's all. And I bought whatever I thought would be good. And when it came to pay, I gave the name. They wrote it down, and they gave me-- everything I bought, I got.

The name of the priest.

The name of the priest, they wrote down, and they gave me everything. You see, I wasn't really worried that somebody's going to stop me. My hair was blond. It's blond now too, a little too blond, but it's still blond. And I have blue eyes. And I spoke German. I still do, fluently, because it was my mother's tongue. So I wasn't worried that--

And we didn't have-- anyway, just a lot of police. And also, soldiers were there. And nobody stopped me. Nobody stopped me when I went. Nobody stopped me when I came.

When I came in, my mother fainted, because she never thought she'll see me again. My father took me aside and wanted to know, how did you pay? I said, I didn't have any money. So I gave the name of your friend. He said, what did you do? I said, I gave your friend's name, and they wrote it down.

He said, didn't you think of the policeman? I said, why should I think about the policeman? He said, he was a good man. Did you see any of your friends? I said, no.

He said, he was an excellent man. If he wouldn't have taken us, we wouldn't be today already alive. I never even thought about the policeman. I'd never even crossed my mind.

And my father said, you will have to go to the priest and tell him what you did, because he doesn't know it. And if they find out anything is wrong, they will just kill him. I said, I will go. And the next day or the day after I went. And when I came there, I told him what I did.

And he was really a very good man. He said, you can do it as much as you want, but you have to promise me now that you will not talk about it to anybody. I said, my father knows. He said, don't worry about your father. You just cannot talk to anybody. And I promised that I won't tell anybody, and I really and truly didn't tell anybody.

Then one day-- I did it about almost a year-- I walked out of the ghetto, and nobody stopped me or anything, and I saw a German soldier on crutches. And he stood on one and with the other he was beating a man. You could tell it was a Jewish man. And he beat him, and he was bleeding.

What got into me, I really have no idea, but I used to do things without really thinking too much. And I gave him a lecture. My father gave me so many, and I knew them all by heart.

And I told him he can't take the law in his own hands, and it's wrong what he's doing. And people were standing there and listening. I didn't know why they were standing and listening. But I had to tell my story, and I did.

And then, all of a sudden, somebody put the hand on me and said, OK, little girl. Now we are going home. When I heard the name "home," I knew I couldn't go home, because there was no doubt that they will kill my family and me of course. But besides that, they used to take five, 10 people just for good measure to show that you did something wrong.

And so I went with the policeman. And you see, the people who were not Jewish, they stayed in their own house. And there was a house not far from the ghetto. And there lived a lady. I didn't know the lady, but I heard that she was living there alone, or whatever. I don't know.

I went there. I rang the bell. And when I heard there was a key, I said, Mamma. She opened the door, and she looked at me with a finger, and she said, I told you once, I told you twice, home and homework.

And the policeman said, is that your daughter Madame. She didn't pay attention, and she repeated it about maybe three times.

And then she did another thing which was very much-- not against the law; it was for the law. She started to hit me right and left. And it was so hard the way she hit me, that I felt my head had to fall down. It can't take it. And the policeman kept asking her, but she didn't answer him. She was just beating me.

And then I thought I heard in a dream, that he said to me, to-- not to me, to her-- he said, stop hitting her. Take her in. She'll do the homework.

And very slowly she stopped, he left, and she took me in and she wanted to know where I'm from. And I told her I'm from the ghetto.

She was a very nice person because she did save my life. There was no doubt about that. But she didn't want to keep me. She said, you will have to go back. I said, of course. I know.

When I came home, I didn't have any food or whatever, and I told my parents what happened. And my father said, you can't go out anymore.

And then, you see, we had other things happen, which I really and truly don't like to talk about it, because I start to cry. My grandparents died in the ghetto of hunger. They were very religious, and they wouldn't eat nothing, whatever I brought. My mother never gave it to anybody but the children. But whatever she would give for them, they would never eat. And they both died of hunger.

And then, maybe a week later, came our turn to go, because they had to have the cattle cars. And our turn came to go to Transnistria. And so we went. And when we were there, they told my mother where to put this or that. We didn't have much anyway.

And my father thought he saw somebody. And he waved. And a soldier knocked him down, which it didn't take much to knock my father down, and he started to hit him. And without thinking-- I didn't think much-- I just threw myself on top of my father, and the soldier kept hitting me. And I think I must have fainted, because I didn't remember any more anything.

When I did remember something, I wanted to talk, but I couldn't talk. Something was bothering me. It's like I had a full mouth.

And my mother's voice came on. And she said, Father is all right, and you'll be all right too. She said they didn't have enough cattle cars. So all the people didn't go. We are a lot of people who were left behind.

Then my father asked my mother if she would go to the priest and ask him if he would give her papers for her two children. And my mother went, and she asked him. And he said, if you bring the children here. I will make them Greek Orthodox.

But my mother really didn't want to make us Greek Orthodox. So my mother said, can't I just get the papers? And he saw that she wanted the paper very badly. He gave her the papers, which wasn't really legal.

He gave her two crosses and told her that the Greek Orthodox do not do it the way everybody else does it, from right to left or left to right-- I can't remember. And in Europe-- I think it's here maybe too-- that when you saw a cathedral or whatever, you had to cross yourself. And he told us how to do it.

And my mother came back. And we had to leave the ghetto alone. And we left. And we turned we turned out in Russia, in Kiev. And it was Russia at that time.

So just and your sister then left and went to Kiev.

Only my sister and I, we both left.

And we had a lot of problems there. My mother-- my father stayed in the ghetto. And we left. And when we were alone, my sister and I would talk German to each other.

And once we were walking, and we were talking to each other. And then, all of a sudden, a man came over, and he said, you're coming with me. He was a tall man with a uniform.

And as we were walking, my sister said, you will tell him the truth and the truth only. I said, how can I tell him the truth? I have just a cross and the papers? She said, the truth.

So when I came, and he interrogated me, I told him the truth. And he put me back in the cell. When I came in the cell, my sister said, I forgot to tell you, but I have a razor blade in my shoe, and I will cut my veins, and you will cut yours.

I said, I will have to think about it. She says, what do you want to think? I said, maybe I don't want to die. I always said, I would like to live one more day. If I live one more day, everything is going to be all right.

She says you want them to do it? It's going to be much worse than when you will do it. And I was not about to do it. I was a coward. I really didn't-- couldn't see doing it.

And then the policeman came in, and he asked me, what did you do on Easter? I said, nothing. He said, didn't you have a holiday? I said, yeah, we had Passover. And Passover, you always ask four questions. I remembered only the first. Like I said, a genius I was not. I told everybody I was, but I really wasn't.

And I started to tell him [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], which was the first question. He said, that's all right. Let's go. And he let us go.

When I say he let us go, he really and truly saved our life, because nobody let anybody go once they had him in the cell. And before he let us go, we didn't know his name. We only knew-- he said to us, for your information, I'm Jewish too. And don't speak any more German when you are alone, because nobody else will let you go.

And the truth was, he was very right. We never ever spoke German again when we walked around.

My sister was working. We had a hard time getting to sleep anywhere. We had a hard time getting food. Once my sister got somewhere, she got two potatoes from the earth. She got it out and washed it, and said here, have it. It's an apple.

I said it's not an apple. She says, when did you have an apple? I said, I don't remember, but that's not an apple. She says, it's an orange. Just eat it.

[LAUGHTER]

And I ate it. And you know what? It really wasn't bad, because you had something to bite into.

And the life was really bad. I went to school, and then I went to a hospital to work, because at that time it was a war, and everybody had to work. And there was a nurse who was about three years, maybe older, than me. And she lived not far where we lived. And we used to go home. And she invited me to her house.

And it was 1944, on December 24, I was in her house. And she said to me, we are going to have a good time. I said really? How are we going have a good time? She said we are going to meet very nice boys.

I thought to myself, if I tell my sister I am going have a good time, that I'll meet some boys, I will have a good time with her that I'll never forget that one. But I didn't say nothing. I said, how are we going to do that?

She says, you know what German girl you have with you? I never told her she's my sister. I never talked about family or whatever. She says, that German girl-- and then we also had another lady which we picked up. We called her the old lady. She wasn't old, but that's what we called her. And she said, they are going to pick them up, and we are going to have a good time.

So I just listened. And I stayed there like I always did. And when I came home, I told them what she told me.

And the old lady said, we have to leave right now. We didn't have nothing to take with us, because we also lost, when we went by train, my sister didn't want I should have it under my head, that I will sleep, and she had it under her head whatever we had. And they took it from her too. So we didn't have nothing really what to take with us. And we left.

And we came again to a forest. And when we came there, we heard a voice from a man.

And Erika, this was the three of you, right? This was your sister and--

Yeah, yeah, and the lady.

--the old lady-- the woman you called the "old lady."

Yeah, old lady. She was not old, but that's what we called her. We went. And the voice said, do you know the word, the military word--

The password.

--password? And the lady said, three girls running. We don't really nothing.

And it was very quiet. And then, all of a sudden, the light came on. He had a flashlight on the lady. And then he put it on himself. And the next thing we knew, they kissed each other. We didn't know what was going on, the lady and the boy. But--

The soldier.

The soldier. It was her son. She had two sons, which we didn't know, of course. Her husband they killed. And she had the two sons. And she was hoping.

Because in 1942, the Czech army started to-- I mean, they built a Czech army so they could fight with the Russians against the German. And the one son was younger. He was in the army. I don't know what happened with the older boy.

And she told him that we have to really leave Russia. He said, he'll go and ask the officers that they will take us along. And he came back, and he said, now they can't take us along because we don't have the uniform. And it's against the law to have people who are not in the army, to take along. They had tanks.

So we knew we had to leave. We didn't know what we were going to do. And he came back, and he said, two soldiers said they will each take a girl, and I'll take my mother. And we will leave you off in Poland.

And that's what they did. When we came to Poland, was about 3:00, 4:00 in the morning. And he did it-- they did it so the officer wouldn't know that we were there.

And you were in tanks.

We were in tanks, yeah. Each one could take only one person there.

And he went to the first house and asked if she has room. She says, yes, she has upstairs a room, and we can go there. And he said he'll pick us up the next day. He said it's a wife of an officer with her two daughters. We didn't look nothing like her, but we could have looked like the father.

And as soon as he left, he said, you can go upstairs. We went upstairs. We didn't even take our clothes off, because it was January. And we were cold as could be.

When my sister came in, and she said, we have to run right now. She heard the lady talk to somebody, and tell-- tells the

person that she has three Jews. If you want, you can have them. And the lady started to tell her that she can't run anymore, that she's tired. But she will keep the people so they won't run after us.

My sister didn't pay attention. She usually was very polite, but she never paid attention. She opened the window. And we were high. And she said you throw the lady out, and then you go.

And I asked her, do you want to go to the window. She said no. I said you want that in your mouth? She said no.

So I pushed her. And there my sister was. She was half her size in every way in her height. And she was a skinny little nothing. And she stood there and held her hand.

She really broke her fall-- not that she caught her. But nothing happened to her. And when I looked, nobody was holding the arms for me out. So I just jumped.

And we went. And we found a car from military. And we came to the first Czech place, to Snina.

When we came there, there was a army, Czech army. And they were very happy to see us. And the first thing they did, which was the right thing-- they gave us food. I do not remember what they gave us. But whatever was there, all three of us ate everything.

Then we were so sick that I can't even begin to tell you how sick we were, because we ate probably like pigs. And we were very, very sick.

The lady we found out, was not an old lady, and they took her in the army. They would have taken my sister in the army too, but I was--

Into the Czech army.

In the Czech army. But I was about 15 at that time, so they couldn't really take me. And my sister really didn't want to get married. But they said, if she gets married, maybe he would take me along too.

And we stayed there with one of the peasants. And the soldiers came, and the officers came.

And once an officer came and he saw my sister. She was really a beautiful girl. And he said, I would marry you, and I will take your sister along too. And my sister says, I don't know you, I don't love you, and I don't want to get married. So he left, and that was it.

Then the army left too. That's why they wanted something to happen to us. But we were left behind. The lady left with them.

And the first night, we heard a stone falling. When I woke up, my sister gave him-- she had on a chain. She didn't have the chain, just a little green thing, whatever, you put on a chain.

Charm.

Charm.

The charm.

And I had a charm too. I had a sun-- my-- it's sunshine. Because in German, they never called me Erika which was my name, but Sonnenschein, which is "sunrise."

And I said should, I give it to you? She says, no, you don't have to. And my daughter has it now, and she wears it. And so--

But your sister, she gave her charm--

She gave her charm away, and she didn't want me to give mine. So I kept it.

And gave it in exchange for--

For taking us to Hummene, which was another town. And there the lady had a child about 13, 14 months old. And he talked to the lady. And the lady wanted to know if he can wash floors and so on. And he said, they can do anything you want.

And so he left. And she said, can one of you-- I had soldiers here last night-- wash the floor, and one could take care of the baby? My sister said, yes, we can.

And she said, she doesn't have any food. She have to go to her mother or grandmother. But when she comes back, she will bring something. All she had was a few noodles for the baby.

And so my sister said, you take care of the baby. She was not taking care of babies. I love babies, but she didn't. So anyway, she washed the floor, and I went to take care of the baby.

And I did the noodles probably not very well, because they weren't very soft when I-- so I put it in my mouth, and I chewed it, and put it in the baby's mouth. The baby was probably as hungry as I was. And so he ate whatever.

And all of a sudden, I hear you German spy. We will show you. I opened the door with the baby in my arm, and there were Russian officers with their guns at my sister.

So I went between the guns and her, and I told her, in a different language, disappear, which she did. And they wanted to know where she is. And I said, she's right here.

Where I got the idea, I really have no idea. But I told them. I think he said that he's going to pick us up, that she's the wife of an officer. So I told them she's a wife of an officer, but she doesn't know what's going on. She doesn't know that they are our brothers.

He said, of course, we are your brothers. I said, you know and I know, but she doesn't know nothing.

And I told the story, told. And all of a sudden, I see a Czech soldier. I think, my God what is he doing here? But I didn't-- I just told him. I didn't even know if he knew us or whatever. Then the Russians had to leave.

And I said, what are you doing here? He said, you know where you were in Hummene. There were 16 Jews, and they all came out, and they were all killed by the people. And we were sure that you were killed too. But the guy who had you said no, that he took you, and told us where you are, and that's why we came here.

And my sister wanted to know if he knows the officer who wanted to marry her. And he said, he's fighting somewhere. I don't know where.

And he took my sister till the end of March before she found him. And he married her. And he took me. That was my sister. Her hair was blond. And that's her husband. He was 15 years older than she was.

And he was the soldier that had proposed to her.

Proposed to her, and she didn't want to. So she married him. And that was the best thing, which could have happened to us, because we didn't have to look to see where we can sleep, or what we can eat. I mean, we got everything.

And he had a friend who was the best man when he got married to my sister. And the best man, that was March 31 when

my sister got married. And in June-- in May 9 was the war finished in Czechoslovakia. And his best man went home to see what happened to his family. And he didn't have.

He had there one aunt who had married a non-Jew who became Jewish. And he was in the concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. But his mother and his sisters were killed in Auschwitz.

And there was nobody from his family. When he came back, he asked me if I would marry him.

At this time, I have never had a boyfriend. I didn't know what a boy is. I didn't know what it is to get married. But I felt, why not?

[LAUGHTER]

So I said, oh, I will get married. But when we went to get married, they wouldn't marry me because I was too young. And then, a few months later, I did. I did get married.

And when the war was over, we didn't know where our parents were. And we got from the United States-- my father had three brothers in the United States, one brother who was very, very nice. And he gave me that thing I have here. He gave me that, my uncle.

And he sent me \$25. And when I got the money, I found out where our parents are.

But you see, we could not go to look for our parents, because we really didn't have papers. We had just the Greek papers. What did I do with? The Greek papers and the cross. So we couldn't go.

But our husbands went. And they brought back-- brought back our parents.

When my father came, he was very unhappy with my sister and me, because we didn't speak any German. We spoke whatever we spoke, but we never spoke German to my mother. And he wanted to know why.

And my sister said, we are talking to her. He said, I didn't hear you say a word in German. He said, why do I have to speak German? Mother speaks another language too. He said, you speak German too.

Anyway, she said that we hated the Germans terribly, that they changed our whole life. We had a bad time. My father said, if you don't stop with the hating, you will never have a good time ever, because you will teach your children to also hate, and they will teach another children also to hate.

You can't hate. You don't have to love them, but you have to be a human being.

What my father was trying to do, I didn't understand it right away, but my sister did. She was older and smarter than me.

And when I stopped hating, I want you to know that it was the best thing I could have ever done. It was like somebody took a big thing off my whole life. I became a very nice person.

And you see, before we left, when we got the papers and we left, when we left from where we were, I couldn't even begin to tell you how well we felt by not hating any more at all.

And my father had with us a long talk before we left that we cannot ever hate anybody, or it doesn't make a difference. Whatever religion they are, that's fine. If they believe in it, that's all what count.

And we really and truly believed my father. I have never hated anybody. And that's what I tell to all the children-- don't ever hate anybody.

And now I would like to--

We'll come back to that in just a minute, Erika. First I want to, before we wrap up-- and I'm going to turn back to Erika in a few moments to have her close our program. But first I'd like to say thank you to Erika for being our "first person." I want to thank all of you for being with us.

As is evident to all of you, we just could only catch a glimpse of what Erika and her family experienced-- just a glimpse. And what you don't get here, of course, is what happened with Erika's life after that. And let me just say just a little bit, if I could do that. Erika would then live in Czechoslovakia, which was under Soviet domination, under the Russians. And eventually, in the late 1950s, 1960, Erika would become the first--

Person--

--person to be legally released.

--leave legally. And who did it was a Russian what was-- who was here, banging--

Khrushchev.

Khrushchev, when he was banging on the table. And my mother and my sister wrote them a telegram that I am in Prague--

When he was in New York, right?

When he was in New York. And all of a sudden, because I had tried to go. I couldn't go nowhere. My late husband passed away in 1957. And I came here in 1960. And in 1963-- it was six years later. I remarried.

They say you shouldn't try the second time. My first husband was the most wonderful person I have ever, ever met. And my second husband is the second best husband I have ever, ever met.

[LAUGHTER]

He is-- we were married in January 45 years. And we--

[APPLAUSE]

And we still love each other. That's what's the biggest thing is that we still love each other.

We're not going to have time for questions. There's just too much for Erika to say. But Erika, you can stay for a few minutes afterwards.

Yeah, I can.

So if anybody would like to come and talk with Erika, please do so. She'll be over here by the podium when the program ends.

I'd like to remind you that we will this is our first First Person of 2008. We'll have a First Person program each Wednesday, with just a couple of exceptions, through the end of August. In June and July, we'll have First Persons also on Thursdays.

So we'll have a First Person program next Wednesday, March the 12th, when our "First Person" will be Mrs. Halina Peabody, who is from Poland. After her father was sent to Siberia by the Russians, Halina, her mother, and her sister found themselves under the control of the Germans. In order to save her two daughters, Halina's mother arranged for them to assume false identities as Catholics, which they did for the rest of the war, enabling them to survive the Holocaust.

So we invite you to, if you're local, to come back any Wednesday. If you're in town next week, please come back if your schedule permits.

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

Yes. You see, when I speak I like very much to speak about Darfur, because when I came to the United States in 1960, and in 1962 I met my husband, and in 1963 we were married. And I met his aunt. She was a wonderful person, and I really liked her.

And she asked me, where were you during the war? I said, I can tell you the whole story. She says, no, I'm not really interested.

And what she did to me-- not only to me, because in the meantime, I met, of course, other survivors. And everybody had some similar situation like I did. And I wouldn't speak at all to anybody.

And then I met a teacher here. And she made me talk. When I heard what's going on in Darfur, I couldn't believe that it can happen. And now, whenever I take the papers, there isn't a time I shouldn't find things about Darfur.

They really don't even believe that anybody can help them. It's terrible what's going on. And you know, I always like to make sure that I talk about it, and that they-- all the kids know about it, what's going on. So many people, so many were killed.

And on top of it, they-- it's terrible, really, what's going on in Darfur, and I would like that everybody should know about it, what's going on in Darfur. It's really a terrible thing.

And with that, I would like to all leave you with the idea never to hate, because I tell you my father had-- he talked his heart out to us. But he was so right. And I'm so happy that he did talk to us, because that I don't hate, it's the most wonderful thing which could have happened to me.

And I thank you all for coming. I really and truly love to talk to you. And it was my pleasure to be with you. Thank you very much. I can--

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Thank you. Thank you very much.

And again, remember, Erika will be over here if anybody would like to talk with her.

Yeah.