

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 today we start our 10th year of First Person. And our first First Person of 2009 is Mrs. Erika Eckstut, whom we shall meet shortly. This 2009 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.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust, who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experiences during the Holocaust and World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum.

With few exceptions, we will have a First Person program each Wednesday through August 26. We will also have First Person programs on Tuesdays in April through July. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a list of upcoming First Person guests.

This year, we are offering a new feature associated with First Person. Excerpts from our conversations with survivors will be available as podcasts on the museum's website. Several are already posted on the website, and Mrs. Eckstut's will be available within the next several weeks.

The First Person podcast joined two other museum podcast series-- Voices on Anti-Semitism and Voices on Genocide Prevention. The podcasts are also available through iTunes.

Erika Eckstut will share her first-person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Erika a few questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have a couple of requests and announcements for you. First, if possible, we ask that you stay seated throughout our one-hour program. That way we minimize any disruptions for Erika as she speaks.

Second, if we have time for questions, and we hope we will at the end of our program, please make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so everyone in the room, including Erika, hears the question, and then she will respond to it.

Finally, we ask that if you have a cell phone or pager, and it's not yet been turned off, that you might do so now. I'd also like to let those of you who may hold passes for the permanent exhibition today know that they are good for the entire afternoon, so you can stay with us until we're done right around 2:00.

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.

Roma and Sinti, or Gypsies, people with mental and physical disabilities, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including Soviet prisoners of war and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

More than 60 years after the Holocaust, hatred, anti-Semitism, and genocide still threaten our world. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades and remind us of the constant need to be vigilant citizens and to stop injustice, prejudice, and hatred wherever and whenever they occur.

What you are about to hear from Erika Eckstut is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with our introduction of Erika Eckstut.

Erika Eckstut was born June 12, 1928, the second daughter of Dolly and Ephram Neuman. Here we see Dolly and Ephram with their daughters, Erika and Beatrice, in this photo taken between 1933 and 1934. Erika is on the left of the two girls.

Erika was born in Znojmo, Czechoslovakia, where her father was a well-respected attorney. The first 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, Ephram, poses here with the students of the Stanesti Hebrew school, which he founded. And that's Ephram, Erika's father, standing right in the middle in the back row.

Erika, Beatrice, and Ephram are all in this photo. The circle is on Erika. And if you look two girls above Erika, you will see her sister Beatrice right below their father. Erika also attended public school.

Here we have a group portrait of the Neuman family in a garden. Seated from left to right are Erika's grandmother, Feige Pesie Neuman, her great grandmother, and Abraham Neuman, her grandfather. Standing, left to right, are her Uncle Max Neuman, her mother Dolly Geller Neuman, and her father Ephram.

In 1940, the Soviet army 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 the official identification card, bearing a large yellow star, issued by the county office of the Jews of Czernowitz to Erika Neuman, authorizing her to remain in Czernowitz rather than be deported in 1942.

Here 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 her 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 would have two children, and she eventually emigrated to the United States in 1960.

Today, Erika lives in the Washington DC area with her husband Donnie, who is with us in the audience. And Donnie, would you wave so folks know you're here?

Although 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 in 1960. Erika has a son and a 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 to ask you to join me in welcoming our first First Person of 2009, Mrs. Erika Eckstut.

[APPLAUSE]

Erika?

[APPLAUSE]

I'm going to move that in just a bit. Just a little bit for you.

I don't need that.

There we go, I think.

OK.

Erika, welcome, and thank you for agreeing to be our First Person today. You've been doing this annually with us since we began 10 years ago.

10 years.

That's pretty amazing, 2000.

Yes, it is.

Erika--

It's hard to believe.

It's hard to believe, isn't it?

Yes.

Absolutely. Erika, let's begin. You were born in a small town in Czechoslovakia, and then your family moved to another small town in Romania when you were very young. In 1940, Romania was occupied by the Russians. And then in 1941, when you were just 13 years old, the Germans entered Romania, forever changing your family's life and your community. Before we turn to those terrible years, please tell us a little bit about your family, your community, and about yourself in those years before the war came to your community.

First of all, I would like to tell you that I am really very honored and pleased to speak to you. Because for me, you are all children. And children are the most important people I like to talk to. Because I hope and pray that it never, ever happens again.

For me, the life before the war was a beautiful time. I had dreams and all kinds of good things. Our trip from Czechoslovakia to Romania, I really and truly don't remember. Because at that time, I was about three years old, and I was not a genius. I couldn't remember when I was two years old, or three years old. I don't really remember that.

When we came there, I met my grandparents. The great-grandmother wasn't alive anymore. My grandfather was the nicest man you have ever, ever seen or met. He was so good and so nice. And he was a farmer.

When my father came there, he told him that he would like to take us all to Palestine, that Hitler is coming to be in charge, and it won't be good for the Jews. So my grandfather said, that's a wonderful idea. But, you know, you will have to have somebody who will take my horse, my cow, and the chickens.

My father couldn't get anybody who would take a horse, a cow, and chickens. And so we didn't go anywhere.

My father got a job, a very good job. He became not the mayor of the town, but almost like. I did speak Romanian very well, but I forgot it. It's over 60 years. I never spoke it. I don't read it, and I forgot it. Except when I met some Romanian people and they spoke to me, and I answered. They thought I speak very well, but I really don't.

And my father was the second-- I really don't know what the thing was, but like the, you know, mayor of the town. And he got a house, which was from the government. And that's where we were supposed to stay, and we stayed there.

And my grandfather was my biggest love in that whole town. I used to be like to be with him. And at that time, my sister already could read.

And when we came to my grandparents, there was in the garden a table and two benches. And my grandfather would go on the side of my sister. My sister had her face right down and read. And he winked at me, and I went, and I was with

the cow, with the horse, and with the chickens all along.

When I came home when the day was over, my grandmother would be very angry at grandfather. Because everything was dirty. Nothing looked like when I left in the morning. And the shoes were the only thing which were really on my feet the same way they were when I started.

And that went on, and I liked it very, very much. It was so nice to be there and to be with them. And my grandmother used to make for me cookies, and it was really a wonderful life to live. I thought the whole world is so nice. It's so nice to live.

And then in 1937, the army, the Romanian army, which was called-- they were almost like the German army. And they accused my father of having a gun when he went to the courthouse or anywhere he went, which it wasn't true. My father never had a gun.

But my father walked with a cane, because he was wounded in the First World War, and he had a lot of operations. And he had to carry a gun-- I mean, not a gun, but the cane.

And my father didn't look for a lawyer, but he took his own case. And he won. He won the case. He was reinstated, and everything was the same.

Then when it was-- you know, I started to go to school, my grandfather bought me a horse-- a little horse, not a big horse. And he would go on a big horse, and I would go on the little horse, and we would go for rides. It was the nicest time in my life. And then, in 1940, the Russians occupied the place where we were.

Erika, before we turn to that--

Yeah.

--just a couple of questions for you.

OK.

You described yourself to me as a-- you were a wild duck. Will you tell us what you meant by that?

I was not like my sister. My sister when they--

She was very studious, wasn't she?

Yeah. She was really an excellent student. I think she was five years old when she could read anything and everything, and all she wanted to do is read. To this day, she still reads, and reads, and reads again.

I did not read. I didn't really care. I don't say if you should do it, because it's not the right thing. But I really didn't care to read. And my father used to give me a lot of lectures. My father would never-- or my mother-- would never, ever touch me or anything.

But I was not a good little girl, because I didn't do nothing I was supposed to. Whatever I was supposed to, I didn't do. And everything else I did.

And my grandfather, he was very much with me. He agreed whatever I did was right. My father never agreed. And I couldn't understand it. I thought, my grandfather is older. I mean, he must know what's right. How come my father never agrees with whatever I do? But that's the way it was, and I was not a very good little girl.

And then when the Russians came-- and I also had a few problems in school. When I was in the first grade, I loved my teacher. And the teacher loved me, too. And my report card was very good. I got all A's and a star.

And once I saw the principal of the school was coming to my father's office, and I knew it wasn't good for me. So I told the girl who took care of us that I'm going to see my Aunt Tina. And she says, don't forget. Be on time back for dinner. I said, I will.

And I came, and we had dinner, and everything went right. Then my father says, could you bring the book from the school? I said, we don't have a book for the second grade. We still have from the first. He said, bring the one from the first.

So I brought the book, and he opened it. He said, read it. So I read it, and I read it very well. He closed it, he opened it, he said read it. I read it very well.

And my father says to my mother, I don't know what the principal thought about. And then he closed the book, opened, and put his hand. In the first grade, down was written, and up was a picture. I had a photographic memory. Now, there is no more film left there.

[LAUGHTER]

But at that time, there was, I think. And when I saw the picture, I read it exactly the way it was written. But once the picture was gone, my whole life was gone, too. I couldn't read.

My father was completely beside himself. He said, how could you have gotten all A's with a star? I said, I love the teacher, and she loves me, too. And my father was very, very upset. And he took a teacher-- not the lady, but the man-- and he taught me to read. And I learned to read. Now I read very well, but it took a while. So that was another little thing I did which I shouldn't have done.

And then we had also Hebrew school. And in the Hebrew school, when it finished, we usually had a little show. And some kids were learning a poem. I had to learn a big poem.

So my father, who knew Hebrew very well, he was looking that I knew it well. Once I knew it well, I went to see my grandfather. My grandfather wanted to know, where have you been so long? I says, I learned the poem. He said, what kind of poem? I told him, a Hebrew poem. The end of the year, we have a show.

He said, before you go to tell the poem, you come to my house. I'll give you some of the cherries. You see, my grandfather could do everything himself. He didn't need anybody. For the cow, or for the horse, he did everything himself.

And in the garden, he had a tree with sour cherries. I have never eaten such good sour cherries like my grandfather did. He made wine out of it. I didn't know it's wine, but he gave me the cherries, and they were very good. I really liked them very much.

And before I went to tell the poem, I went and saw my grandfather, and he gave me a little bowl of cherries, and I ate them. And then I had to tell the poem. I started, and I said the first two lines, then I said the last. Then I started from the beginning, and I said it very well, the whole poem.

And I knew it was well, because they were clapping like they never heard anything so well. I have a feeling they didn't understand Hebrew at all, but that was my personal feeling. I don't know if I was right or not.

And as I came down from the thing, the poem, my father stood there. And he said, breathe on me. Before I could do anything, there came a voice. And the voice said, if you want to talk, you turn around and talk to me. And that was my grandfather. And I don't know what went on, but they didn't talk for a whole week. And then everything was all right.

So you see, a good girl I was not. But I had a lot of fun. I had a lot of fun in school. I had a lot of fun with the kids in the town. I liked all the kids, and I had a very good time.

Erika, of course all of that would change dramatically--

Yes.

--once the Germans came into your town.

Yes, they were--

And you have very strong memories of when they first came. Please tell us what happened to your family and to you when the Germans arrived.

You know, before the Germans arrived, we had the Russians there. And the Russians were there exactly a year, and then they left. When they left maybe a day later or so, there came three men to our house and said we should go with them. My father wanted to know where are we going to go? And they said, you will see. They were not very nice to my father.

And we went. And that was the first time and the worst time I have ever, ever had.

When we came, it was a little like outside town. And there was a park, and I remember it was a park, because I used to go there and play. And there were all the Jews.

In that town were about 500 Jews. And when we got there-- it was like almost in the middle-- stood the rabbi and his two sons. And without saying any word to us, they killed the rabbi and his two sons. And then with their fingers, they took this man, and this man, and this man, and they killed them all.

After, they didn't have any more ammunition. And they took a man, who happened to be my uncle. They shot him once, and it didn't do nothing. And they killed him with their hands. That was the worst thing I have ever, ever seen.

I felt if I would ask my father, he would tell me, but I didn't get a chance really to talk to my father. When I asked him, he said, please stop crying. Everybody was crying, the children. And the adults were saying the prayer for the dead. And then came the Germans.

And with the Germans-- and after that happened, that most of the Jews were killed--

Right there before your eyes.

Just as we stood there. Then we went to the court house. And my father didn't walk in. He stood there, and he started to smoke. And the man came, and he said, I will take you home. My father said, I'm not going nowhere. He said, I'll take your parents, too. And we went home.

When we came home, the house was not the same. There were books on the floor, torn. It was terrible. And I remember I started to cry a lot, my grandmother, too.

And the next thing I knew, I woke up, and somebody was talking to my father, and they wanted to take him away, not anybody else. But my sister wanted to go with him. So then finally, they took my sister, too, and they left.

They went the same way they went the night before, and my sister didn't feel very good. And my father was trying to persuade her to go home, but she wouldn't, and they wouldn't let her.

And then there came a man in a gray suit. My father could not remember his name. And he said this man doesn't belong here. He's going home.

And my father came home, and maybe an hour later or so came the chief of police, who was the chief of police before the Russians came to that town. And he said to my father that he will take us away from there. And that's what he did.

As it got a little darker, he took us away.

Erika, why did you survive that mass killing of most of the Jews on the first night the Germans arrived?

I would like to know that, too. But you see, he didn't take any women or children. He took only men. And I don't know how many men were there.

The next day, we didn't go there, because that same night, the chief of police took us, and he took us through-- what do you call it? It was a-- what?

Forest?

No. Anyway, there were a lot of trees, and he took us there.

So through the woods?

Through the woods. And he said, now you have about 8 or 9 kilometers to get to Czernowitz. So he left, and my father didn't feel very good after he left. And he fell, and he had another heart attack.

And my mother went to get some water with my sister. My grandparents started to cry, and I started to beat my father to talk to me. He didn't talk, but then with a hand, he made that he's all right. And we went, and we came to Czernowitz. And then a few days later, we were in the ghetto.

So you survived what happened in your hometown.

Yes.

But then the police chief had you go to Czernowitz.

Yes.

But in a few days, you were put into a ghetto.

The ghetto, that's right.

Tell us what life was like for you in the ghetto.

You know, whenever I speak, and it came to tell how was it in the ghetto, to tell you it was bad doesn't mean nothing. It was worse than bad. I don't have a word to use what it was like.

There was no food. There was nothing you can do. There was nothing you can eat. And, you know, it was just terrible.

And outside, there were signs. If you help a Jew, you and your family will be killed. There were signs children couldn't go to school. If they find that children are learning anything, they will be killed. It was terrible what was outside, was all over they were talking about.

And my father, who was so much for just the right way, you can't take the law in your own hands, he decided that we have to learn something in the ghetto, because we didn't have any food, and we didn't have what to do. And there were professors, teachers, students. Anybody could have taught us. We really didn't know anything yet.

And they started, and my father also taught us. He taught us about the French Revolution, which really didn't interest me at all. And I didn't pay attention. And whenever my father asked me, I never had an answer, because I never paid attention.

And then my father was telling me that I hurt him very much by never knowing anything. I said, I didn't pay attention. He says, why didn't you pay attention? I said, I'm dreaming of a piece of bread. If I would have a piece of bread, I would be very happy. And my father said, aren't the other children hungry, too? I said, maybe not as much as I am.

Erika, so here under those terrible conditions in the ghetto with no food, your father, who had founded the Hebrew school in your hometown--

Yes.

--and others were still concerned about making sure you got an education.

Yes, that was the most important thing.

And being the wild duck that you were, though, you could not be constrained for long.

No.

And so you began to make forays or sneak out of the ghetto.

I did.

Tell us about that.

You know, after my father told me that I hurt him very much, I really realized I did. And as you saw the thing I had, the ID-- and we wore the star on the coat. I took the star, and I took the ID, and I left it where I slept, and I walked out. I wasn't worried that anybody is going stop me. I was blond now and really very blond, but I was really blond.

And I have blue eyes, and my mother's tongue was German. So I said nothing can happen to me. And I also heard my mother talk that my father had a friend when he was about seven or eight years old. And the friend became a priest, and I knew his name. I forgot his name. I forgot a lot of names. But I knew it then.

And I went where they sold for nuns, for priests. And I took whatever I thought would be all right for us.

It was a store where they sold to priests and nuns?

To priests and nuns. And when it came to pay, I said Father So-and-so is going to pay. And they wrote it down, and asked me is that the right way? I said, yes. And they gave me the food, and I went back.

When I came in the ghetto, my mother fainted. I couldn't see why she fainted. But she never thought she'd ever see me again. My father wanted to know how did I pay for the food. And when I told him that I said his friend is going to pay, my father said, who told you I had a friend? I said, I heard mother talk about it. Nobody told me.

And my father said, you know, you will have to go and tell him what you did. I said, all right. So the next day, I had to go to the priest.

And you know, the priest was not a priest. He was like an angel. He was so nice. And when I told him what I did, he says, you have to promise me now that you will never tell anybody how you do what you do to nobody. I said, my father knows. He said, don't worry about your father. Just promise you won't talk to anybody. And I did, because I didn't tell anybody what and how I did.

And then one day-- I must have done it almost a year. When one day when I walked out, I saw a German soldier on crutches. And he stood on one, and with the other he was beating a man. The man was on the street.

And I don't know what got into me. I didn't have my star. I didn't have nothing. And I started to give him a lecture. I

said, how can you beat the man? He's not doing nothing to you. He said, that's not a man. It's a dirty Jew.

I said, who cares what it is? But he's not doing nothing to you. And you do not take the law in your own hands. And at that, a policeman put his hand on me, and he said, OK, little girl, that's going to be enough. Let's go home.

I knew if I take him to the ghetto that me and my family will be killed. So I didn't want to take him to the ghetto. I couldn't. But I also knew that the people who were not Jewish stayed in their homes. They never left.

So I just went where I knew there was living a lady by herself. I never saw anybody else. And when she started to do with the keys, I said, Mama? And the woman opened the door, and the policeman said, is that your daughter, Madame?

And this was a woman you did not know.

No, I didn't know. I never saw her. And she-- with her finger to me, she said to me, I told you once. I told you twice-- home and homework. And the policeman keeps asking, is that your daughter? She said, I told you once, I told you twice-- home and homework. And when he constantly keeps asking her, she started to hit me right and left.

And it was so hard the hitting that I felt doesn't matter now anything, because my head will fall down. I mean, how much can it take?

And I felt-- I thought-- I wasn't really sure that the policeman was saying, stop hitting her. Take her in. And she did, very slowly 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 said, you know, you will have to go back. I said, I know. And I thanked her, and I left. And when I came home, and I told my father what happened, he says, you can't go out anymore.

And then about two days later or three days later, it came the time for us to go to the concentration camp. And when we were on the place, they usually did it where they would do-- you know, the boys would play their games-- was a big place, playground. And they told my mother, this here, this to be there.

And my father thought he saw somebody he knows, so he waved. As soon as he started to wave, a soldier knocked him down, and he fell. And without thinking a second-- I really didn't think what I was doing. I just did. I threw myself on top of my father. And the soldier didn't stop. He just kept hitting me. And then I didn't know what really happened.

And one time, I wanted to talk, and I couldn't. Something was bothering me, like my tongue wouldn't go. And my mother's voice came on, and she said, father is all right, and you will be all right, too. But the soldier did a very good job on you, and your right lung is not right, and he's trying to put it right. So he put something in your mouth so you shouldn't scream.

And I didn't scream. And he made it so that a week ago Monday, I went for a shot because I can't ever have an operation or anything for my back. I had a shot, and people say it's very painful. It was not very painful, not to me. I'm used to pain, and it was really not bad. And now it's better for me. So I really had a very bad time with my back.

This back injury that you have today dates back to when the soldier beat you.

That's from the time the soldier beat me.

Over 60 years ago.

Yeah.

Erika, it got so bad, of course, and dangerous that your parents decided finally that they needed to get you and your sister out of the ghetto.

Yeah.

How did they do that?

You know, when we went to go to the concentration camp, and the soldiers beat my father and me, that time they didn't have enough cattle cars, and we didn't go. So my father asked my mother if she would go to the priest and ask him to give her papers for my sister and myself. And my mother went.

And the priest said, if she would bring the children, he would give the papers we need. But my mother, I guess, didn't want us to become Greek, so she didn't bring us. She says, please, can you just give us the paper for my children-- not for us, just for the children?

And like I said before, he wasn't a human being. He was like an angel. And he gave us the papers, and he gave her two crosses. And he said, whenever we go, when we see a-- what do you call it? Whenever we see a thing where you pray, you have to always cross yourself, and that the Greek did not cross themselves like the Catholics. I think one crossed from right to left and left to right. I don't really remember how they crossed, but we have to always cross ourselves.

So he was a Greek Orthodox priest?

Yes, he was a Greek Orthodox priest. And we got the papers, and we left the ghetto.

Just and your sister.

Just me and my sister. My father wouldn't go out. Because in Europe, only the Jews were circumcised, not anybody else. So when they had a problem with a Jew, and they thought-- they just thought you are a Jew-- they knew what to do, and they could tell right away if you were Jewish or not. That was a problem with that.

And then after we went to Russia, we had their problems, too. Because my sister was-- she could work, and she got a job. But we didn't have enough. We didn't have really what to eat.

And once she got some potatoes. So she washed them very well.

So you and your sister alone went to where, Kyiv?

To Kyiv.

To Kyiv in Russia.

We were in Kyiv. And she gave me the potato. She says, eat it. It's an apple. I said, that's not an apple. She says, how do you know? When did you have an apple? I said, I don't remember when, but that's not an apple. She says, you are right. It's an orange. Eat it.

[LAUGHTER]

And I ate it. And it was really very good.

The potato.

Yeah, the potato. To this day, I can eat raw potatoes. It doesn't matter. They are really-- it's not really bad. I mean, if you taste it, it's good. So that was one thing.

So here you and your sister alone--

Alone.

--are now in Russia.

Yeah, in Russia. And I went to school, and I also went to a hospital to work, because it was a war. And there was a nurse who was maybe three years older than me, not more. At that time, I was almost 15. And we became friends. When I went home, she went home. And I used to come in the evening and visit her.

In the meantime, my sister and I-- I don't really know where. We found an old lady. We didn't find her. She was where we were, and they had to get rid of us and of the lady. And she stayed with us, and wherever we went, she went, too.

And we were in that place where we stayed. And it was the 24th of December, 1944-- '43 or '44-- '44. And I went to see the girl, which I always did. And she told me that we were going to have a very good time. I said, what time are we going have?

She said, you know, tomorrow the secret police will come, and they will take away the German, what woman you have, which was my sister. She was so blond that she really was almost white. And they said and then the other lady, and, of course, you will be with me.

So just so we understand, you, your sister, and the person you called the old lady, you were living together.

Together, yeah.

And your friend didn't realize that it was your sister. She just thought--

No never, never.

You had lodging with these people.

Yeah, that's right.

And so she said the secret police are going to pick up your sister.

Yeah, that German spy.

She's a German spy.

She's a German spy. So I just stayed there like I always did, and I came back. And I told my sister and the old lady. By the way, she was not an old lady, but we called her the old lady.

Because I think you told me she was probably 35.

Yeah, about 35.

But to you, she was an old lady.

Yeah, she was an old lady at that time. For me she was an old lady.

So now you know that there's going to be a raid on your house.

Yeah.

What did you do?

We left the same night I came back. And we went, and we came to the, you know, were a lot of trees.

Came to the woods.

Woods. And we heard a man saying, do you know the secret password from the police? Thank you. And we didn't know nothing. And the old lady said, three women running. And they were soldiers, and one of the soldiers had a light. He put the light on her, and then he put it on his face. And the next thing you knew, they kissed each other.

So we didn't know what was going on, and it was a mother and son. She had a husband and two sons. This was her younger son. He was in the army.

In the Russian army.

No, in the Czech army.

Czech army.

In 1942, the Czech government, which at the time was in England, started the first battalion of Czechs. Because there were a lot of Czechs in the Russia and all around, and they all came to be in the army. And that's what happened that day.

So just by coincidence, these soldiers who stopped you, one of them turns out to be her son.

Yeah, it was her son.

OK, wow.

That's why they kissed. And he said that he's going to ask the officers to take us along. And then he came back, and he said, no, we don't have a uniform, and we can't really go.

And maybe half an hour later, we didn't know what to do with you. We had to leave. He came, and he said he will take his mother, and two of his friends will each take us. And when we come to Poland, he will let us out like 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning before the officers get up, and he will leave us there for a day or so.

And that's what he did. He took us, and he went to a house and asked if she has room. And the lady said, yes.

And the house was actually across the border in Poland now.

In Poland. She said, yes, upstairs she has room we can go. And he left, and he said he's going come the next day to pick us up.

And in the meantime, when he said he's going to, we went upstairs. We didn't take our clothes off, because at that time, it was already January. And we were very, very cold.

So we stayed there, and then my sister was running around back and forth. And then she came. She says, we have to run right now through the window. We can't go down. And the lady was starting to talk that she cannot run anymore, and that we can do whatever we want, but she has to stay here, and she will take care.

My sister didn't-- she said, I'm going. You throw the lady out, then you jump. And when she left, I said, would you come to the window? She said, no. I said, would you like that in your mouth? She said, no. So I shoved her to the window, and I threw her out.

And there was standing my sister, who was half her size every way. Every way you looked, she was half her size. And she was holding her arms. And she didn't really catch her, but she broke her fall. And as she broke her fall, nothing

happened to her.

So I looked, but nobody was holding the arms anymore, so I jumped. And you know what? Nothing even happened. But maybe that's why I had to have two new knees. I don't know.

What prompted your sister to say we've got to get out of this house?

Yeah, we found that out. You see, Polish and Czech is really very similar. The word is a little different, but I think that we understand about 70%, 80% of the Polish language. And she heard the lady say that she has three Jews, and if you want, you can have them.

So she just came to tell us that we have to run. There was no other way she could do it. And that's what she did.

And when we came down, we were all there. We got into-- we found only a car, which was a military car. And we went, and we came to Slovakia.

Now, the Czechs are not with the Slovaks anymore, but at that time, that's why it was Czechoslovakia. Now the Czech Republic.

So we came to Snina, which was a Slovak town. And there were a lot of Czech soldiers. And they were very happy to see us. There were also a lot of Jewish soldiers there. And they gave us a lot of food, which was really not the right thing to do, because we didn't eat a few days. And whatever they gave us, I don't even know what it was, but there was nothing left. We ate everything. And then we were all very sick. So that was this story.

At this point, because you're now protected by the Czech soldiers, you're safe. When did you-- Erika, is that when the war ended for you?

No.

When did the war end for you?

War ended at-- you know, they took the lady in the army. We found out she was not an old lady, because they took her in the army.

As a soldier.

They would have taken-- as a soldier. They would have taken my sister, too. But I was 15, which wasn't good enough, because I had to be 21 to be in the army. And my sister said she doesn't really want to leave me, and she's going to be with me. And that night, they left, or in the morning the army left. And we were left there.

And the first night, somebody threw a stone in our place where we were. And I woke up after my sister already was. She had a little green thing on a chain, like-- yeah a little thing.

A charm.

A charm. And she gave it to her, to the man. And I said, should I give him mine, too? She said, no, never mind.

I had also a charm. Mine was a sunshine. I was not a sunshine, but that's what they called me, you know? So I had a little sunshine, and I gave it to my daughter, and she still wears it. She has it.

And so we the men took us to another town, which was Humenná, was also in Slovakia. And there he took us to a lady who had a little boy. And the lady wanted to know if we can wash the floor or do whatever. And he said we can do everything.

So the lady told us that she has to go to see her mother or grandmother. I really don't remember who. And when she comes back, she'll bring us food. She had just a few noodles for the baby.

So she left, and my sister said, you take care of the baby. I love babies. But my sister didn't really care to take care of the baby. She said, I will wash the floor. You take care of the baby.

So I did, and I cooked the noodles, and I didn't do a good job, because they were a little hard. So I put it in my mouth. I chewed it, and put it in the baby's mouth-- was very, very hygienic, you know?

It worked.

But it worked. Because whatever I put in his mouth, he ate. He was as hungry as I was. But I didn't eat it. I just chewed it and gave it to him. He was a cute little baby.

And then all of a sudden, I heard again, you German spy. We will show you. I knew there were Russians there. I mean, from the voice I could tell, and they spoke Russian.

So I went out with the baby, you know, dripping from him whatever I put in his mouth. And there were three soldiers. And I told them that she's not a German spy, she's a Jewish girl. And they didn't believe it, and I said, yes, she is.

You know, the problem was you couldn't really say that you are Jewish. How could you prove it? But, I mean, you know. I did tell them, and I started to tell the story, and I started to cry myself, because I was so scared what's going to happen.

And in the meantime, I told my sister to disappear. When they saw that she's gone, they wanted to know. I said, she doesn't know what's going on. She doesn't know you. She doesn't know me. She just knows how to wash the floor. And she couldn't let-- but they were so upset. She wouldn't let them go in there she washed.

And, of course, they were very mad about that. They wanted to know where, and I told them she doesn't know nothing. She doesn't remember, and her husband doesn't know about it, which was a lie, because she wasn't married or anything.

And when we were there, there were officers and soldiers who came to look at us like they never saw any girls. But the funny thing was, one officer-- and I have a picture of my sister. She married him. He was 15 years older than she. And she was so beautiful, and he wanted to marry her.

And she said, I don't know you. I don't love you. And I really don't want to get married. So he left. And when we were in that house, and the Russians were there, and I was telling them the story and all, as I was talking, a Czech soldier walked in. And I said, what is a Czech soldier doing here now? I have the Russians here. What do I-- I didn't know who he was.

So I asked him, what do you want? He said, you remember you were in Snina? There were 16 Jews, and they heard that there were three Czechs, and that you were all out, and everything was fine. So they came out.

And when we were there, the army was there. When the army left, we left, because they threw this-- so we didn't know that they killed everybody. And when the Czechs heard that they killed, they wanted to know what happened to us. And they went to the guy, and he said, I took them to woman, and told them where we are, and that's why the Czech soldier was there.

So my sister wanted to know if the soldier knows where that officer is. He didn't know. He said he's fighting somewhere. I don't know where, but he's fighting somewhere.

And my sister was looking for him, and end of March she found him. And she went to him and asked him if he would please marry her. And he said, I wanted to marry you before, and I'll be happy to marry you now. And he married her, and he had a best man. And she got married in March.

And on May the 9th was the end of the war in Czechoslovakia. So for us, it was really like the war had ended. And, of course, we were thinking about our parents. And then the best man came and asked me if I would marry him.

I was 16. I didn't know what it is to get married. I'd never had a boyfriend. I never knew nothing, because from 12 to 16, I was fighting the war. I didn't know nothing. So I felt why wouldn't I get married? What else can I do?

But what I didn't realize was that four days later, he told me I have to go to school, which I didn't like at all. But I did go, and I really studied very, very hard, because I didn't want to go where I belonged, and I wanted to go to the university. And he said you didn't even finish high school. How can you go to the university?

So it was hard, but I did make it. And we got married.

And we saw the picture of your wedding day.

Yeah.

Erika, in the little time that we have left, I'd like you to, first of all, tell us. Now the war is over for you. You're getting married. Your sister is married to these Czech soldiers. You hadn't seen your parents since you left the ghetto.

Yeah, almost two years. Yeah.

How did you reconnect with your parents? Tell us that.

That was a very, very nice-- the way we did it. What I didn't tell you to begin with, my father was from five sons. One son fell in the First World War. The other three went all to the United States of America. And only my father was the only one left in Europe. The others were all gone.

One of them, who was very, very good, and he-- Max, who was also on the picture-- he was looking for us. And he sent to Prague \$25 for Erika Neuman. You know, he was looking.

Just to Prague, Erika Neuman, \$25.

Yeah. He sent to others, too, but that came.

Right, he got to you.

It got to me.

So we wrote, and we got, of course, back where they are. And they were in Bucharest, which was the capital of Romania. But we left them in Czernowitz, which was far away from Bucharest.

And you know what? We never found out how they came to Bucharest, why they were in Bucharest. Because I have a very important thing I would like to leave with everybody-- what happened to me when I got together with my parents, and my father wanted to know why we do not speak any German to my mother.

My mother didn't speak good Czech, really very little. But she understood. So we spoke Czech.

And, you know, my mother spoke German. So my father asked, how come you don't speak German? And my sister was trying to tell him something. And when he kept asking her, I said, I hate the Germans. He says, you what? I said, I hate them like I never hated anything.

He said you want your children to go through what you went through? I said, they won't. He said, how are you going to prevent it, by hating them? I said, I will prevent it. I didn't know how, but I was sure I will prevent it.

My father talked his heart out. He really talked. And what he was trying to do is we should be nice human beings. And he said, you don't have to love the Germans. You don't have to care for them. But hate? No.

He said, if you hate, you are not better than the worst German whatever he did. And I couldn't understand why my father would tell me that I can't hate the Germans. Why can't I hate them?

And he spoke and spoke. And when I finally understood what my father was trying to do, I really and truly can give you my word. I have never, ever hated anybody. I don't love everybody. I love a lot of people, but I don't love everybody. Whoever I don't love, I don't wish him no harm-- no harm whatsoever. But I don't love him. He's not my type. I don't love him.

[LAUGHTER]

But I really and truly have never, ever hated someone. And then my father used to say, you know, whatever anybody is, if he's Catholic, whatever else he is, doesn't make a difference.

I'm also a godmother for my boss, and he was English whatever. I forgot what it is. And I had to go to the priest to say that I would never make him a Jew. I said, I would never make anybody anything but what they are. Whatever you believe in, that's all you should believe in. If I like you, I like you. If I don't like you, it doesn't make a difference.

You should believe in whatever you do, and I believe in whatever I do. And if you are a good person, that's all I need. I don't have to change. Why would I ever change? That's a very personal thing. Why would I ever change anybody? I would never, ever do that.

And that's what I would like to leave everybody with, just to make sure that you live in peace with everybody. Don't ever, ever hate anybody. Because hatred is such a bad thing. You hate, you just hurt yourself. Nobody's going to hate because you hate. You can hate as much as you want. You are alone. Nobody will hate because you hate.

And that's what I would like to leave you. If you have any kind of question to me, I will be very happy to answer you.

Erika, I think that we probably are almost out of time. I have a couple more things that I need to do to close our program. But Erika, can you stay behind for a few minutes?

I can stay behind as long as--

So if you would like to come up afterwards, and meet Erika, and chat with her, ask her any questions, please feel free to do so in just a couple of minutes. We're out of time, so we won't be able to take questions as a group. And we've only, as you can imagine, just scratched the surface of what Erika experienced, not only during the war, but then after the war.

If you could hear the rest of her remarkable journey that she has taken, you would be pretty astonished. Because after the war, Erika would live under communist rule in Czechoslovakia until 1960. And if I'm not mistaken, Erika was the first person to be legally allowed to leave Communist rule behind the Iron--

Khrushchev let me go.

Khrushchev himself, the leader of Russia, let her go personally after she and her family appealed to him.

Yes.

So in 1960, she came here. She would meet Donnie, marry Donnie, and has been here ever since.

Before we wrap up, I want to thank all of you for being with us, being at our First Person program. I hope that you can return another time. We will present another First Person program next Wednesday, March 11, when our First Person

will be Mrs. Fanny Eisenberg.

Mrs. Eisenberg, whose family moved from Poland to Brussels, Belgium when she was six, sent her three-year-old daughter into hiding in 1942 when the Nazis began deporting Belgian Jews to slave labor and death camps. Mrs. Eisenberg would survive Auschwitz, slave labor in a munitions factory, and a death march before she was liberated. After the war, she would be reunited with her daughter and her husband, who had volunteered with the British Air Force.

So if you get a chance to come back next week or any other Wednesday between now and the end of August, or Tuesdays between April and July, we would love to have you back. Please remember that can access First Person excerpts and other museum programs in audio form as podcasts on the museum's website at iTunes.

I'd like to thank Erika for just being so brave before us, and to share so much in such a limited time. And again, she'll join us right afterwards up here if you would like to ask her some questions. So with that, help me thank Erika Eckstut.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you very, very much. I really thank you. And if you want, you can come and ask me any questions you want, and I will be very happy to answer you anything.