

Good afternoon. And welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. And I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. Thank you for joining us.

We are in our 10th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Helen Luksenburg, 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 first hand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each First Person is a volunteer in some capacity with the museum. We will have a First Person program each Wednesday through August 26. And we will have First Person programs on Tuesdays through the end of July. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org, that's www.ushmm.org provides a list of the upcoming First Person guests.

This year we are offering a new feature associated with First Person, excerpts from our conversations with survivors are available as podcasts on the museum's website. Several from this year are already posted on the website. And Helen Luksenburg's will be posted over the next few weeks.

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

As most of you know, on June 10, a gunman full of hate came to the museum and tragically took the life of Officer Stephen Jones. Officer Jones, giving his life, and his fellow officer, stopped the gunman before he cause more horror and more cause more harm to people here at the museum. We'd like to ask you to join us in a moment of silence in honor of Officer Jones, his family, his friends, and his colleagues, including those here at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Our First Person today is Mrs. Helen Luksenburg, who will share her first person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. Depending upon time, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Helen some questions when she's finished speaking. Before you're introduced to her, I have several requests of you and a couple of announcements.

First, if possible, please stay seated with us throughout our one hour program. That way we minimize any disruptions for Helen as she is speaking. Second, if we do have time for question and answers at the end of the program, we ask that if you have a question you make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so everyone in the room, including Helen, hears your question before she responds.

If you have a cell phone or a pager, we ask that you take this opportunity to turn it off. For those of you who may have passes to the permanent exhibition today, please note that they are good for the entire afternoon. So you can stay seated with us through our one hour program.

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims. 6 million were murdered. 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 homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi Germany. More than 60 years after the Holocaust, hatred, anti-Semitism, and genocide still threaten our world, as we saw so dramatically on June 10.

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 Helen Luksenburg is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Helen's introduction.

And we begin with this portrait of Helen Luksenburg, who was the eldest of three children from a comfortable middle

class Jewish family. On this map of Europe, the arrow points to Poland. And on this map of Poland, the arrow points to Sosnowiec, where Helen was born April 4, 1926. In this photo, we see Helen, who's circled in the middle, with her two cousins, Edzja on the left and Hadassa Sudzanowska on the right as they pose with a bear in Sosnowiec. Helen was just 13 when the German army invaded Poland in 1939.

By the end of the year, Jews were subject to a host of discriminatory laws. Helen's father was forced to close his textile business. And here we see German troops marching into Poland.

In 1943, the Jews of Sosnowiec were forced to move into a ghetto. And this photograph is of a sewing workshop in the Sosnowiec ghetto. And I believe, if I remember right, I don't know if you can see my cursor, but I believe it's on Helen with her head bowed, right here in the middle.

On the left, we see a photo of girls who are member of the Hanoar Hatzioni Zionist youth movement in the Sosnowiec ghetto. And on the right, the photo is a group of young Jewish women, members of the Hanoar Hatzioni youth movement, picking vegetables on the farm.

Helen was deported to Gleiwitz, and the first arrow points to the location of Gleiwitz after being selected for forced labor. Gleiwitz became part of a vast Auschwitz concentration camp network. While there, Helen met Welek Luksenburg through a fence. He was a fellow inmate.

As the Soviet army approached in January 1945, prisoners from Gleiwitz were evacuated. Helen survived a death march, which is shown by our second arrow on the map. And she was forced to march to the Ravensbruck concentration camp, which the third arrow points to. And it was there that she was liberated by Soviet troops in 1945.

Helen would reunite with Welek in a displaced persons camp in the American-occupied zone of Germany. And they would be married on March 2, 1947. Helen and Welek, now known as William, live in Silver Spring, Maryland, just outside of Washington, DC. Upon their arrival in the Washington, DC area in 1949, William became a master plumber, then bought and ran his own service station for many years before retiring.

The Luksenburgs have three children. Two are doctors and the other is an attorney. They also have five grandchildren. Both Helen and William are volunteers here at the museum. And they are very active in civic matters. Helen works at the museum's donations and membership desk, where you will find her on Mondays. And William, who will be our First Person on July 7, is with us today. And I'd like to acknowledge William in the front row.

[APPLAUSE]

And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Helen Luksenburg.

[APPLAUSE]

[WHISPERING] Remember, just talk to the back of the room. Helen, thank you for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person today.

In the late summer of 1939, you were just 13 years of age and you were living with your parents and your two younger brothers in Sosnowiec, a heavily industrialized area very close to the German border. Before we talk about the events that began after the German invasion of Poland, tell us first about your early years, about your family, about your community, and about yourself in those pre-war years.

Before the war, I attended school. But at age 13, Jewish children were not allowed anymore to attend school. I was the oldest one of the three children. I had a brother and a younger sister.

My sister hardly could read yet. But we couldn't afford-- for a while, we had a tutor for her. But after my father said we can't afford. We didn't have any income coming in. We were selling everything possible.

[CRYING]

And one mistake what my parents made, that they had some jewelry and they buried it. And my grandfather had a house in a small town. And because I was born near the German border, so my mother living through one war already was very nervous. She was close to a nervous breakdown.

So my father put us on a train to go and live further away. And we went to this small town where my aunt lived in the building. And we stayed there for a couple months. But I missed my father. So somebody gave me a ride with a horse and buggy to go back home.

Helen, may I interrupt? Before we go on with what you're about to tell us, let me ask you. Just tell us a little bit more about your father. And I remember you telling me he was a very kind man and about he would take rolls from home to feed poor children. Tell us a little bit about your dad.

Before the war, I don't remember. He was busy making a living. But during the war when he sent us out, he used to go and stay at 3 o'clock in the morning in a bakery to get some bread for my aunt and her children.

Because she was a sick woman and they didn't run away. Most of my mother's family run away because we were so close to the border. But he used to get up at 3 o'clock in the morning, stay in line to get some bread, and he went and took it over to my aunt.

When I arrived at home, after I missed my mother and father, after two months, I opened the credenza. And it was a pile of bread. Penicillin was growing on it. And I said to my father, for whom did you save that bread? He said for my children.

[CRYING]

He thought that any day will come that he has enough bread. We had to throw out that bread. It wasn't edible anymore. And it was a while after my mother arranged some things to be able to come back with my brother and my sister. My father never was the same.

Because when I was born near the German border. The war broke out on Friday, September the 1st. And the same day, I remember standing in the street in the evening that Friday, giving out coffee to the Polish army, defeated, were coming back from the border.

They were in retreat. And you were serving them coffee?

The war didn't last long. The longest period was under Warsaw, that they took over Warsaw. I think three or four weeks and then Warsaw fell, too. So we stood, gave out coffee to the army.

And the Polish army, they wasn't mechanized. Everything they were wearing heavy shoes with nails in it in order not to wear out the soles. And everything they carry on their back.

It wasn't motorized at all. The next day the Germans just drove in with the trucks, with the tanks, and everything. It wasn't like Germany.

Then our problems started. We had to wear armbands on the left arm. We were not allowed on certain streets to walk. Schools were obsolete for Jewish children. And everything was limited.

At 7 o'clock in the evening, you were not allowed to be on the streets anymore, was curfew. And life was getting more difficult. You made a living just selling everything was possible.

Our mistake, my parents' mistake, was rather my mother's. That little bit jewelry she had, we buried it. Because we were run away. My mother was very nervous.

And we run away. My father put us on a train. Go to the small town what was my grandfather's building there.

And we lived with my aunt and the whole family. I remember there were a lot of younger children in the family. I belonged to the oldest grandchildren. And the small children, they were so pampered before the war. And when the war broke out, everybody was crying. They are hungry. And it was not enough bread.

So after a while, being there, I missed my father because he never came to join us. And somebody gave me a ride on a horse and buggy. And I arrived.

I didn't recognize my father when I arrived. He looked like Gandhi when he was released from prison. He was bald. And he lost so much weight.

I said, what happened. And he opened the credenza. And it was a pile of bread. As I mentioned before, penicillin was growing on it. I said for whom did you-- save that bread for my children. We threw it all out.

And because all men had to go and register, he was going every day, before we came, to the city hall. He got to the corner. It was a long walk. And he turned around.

He continued for about a month. The last day he came, they called it off. He didn't have enough courage to go in because he didn't know what to expect, what will happen.

The first day, he had a beer with a friend. And he walked with the friend. My father went straight, and the friend made a left turn.

And the Germans arrived on the motorcycles. And they yelled out halt. And he didn't listen. He was running, the man.

My father went into the first building. They opened the doors and let him in because they knew him. So they trusted him. The men never made it. They shot him on the spot.

My father never recovered after that. He was not like the same man. He was afraid of his own shadow. By the time I arrived after two months, I didn't recognize him hardly.

Helen, you and your family would live under these circumstances until sometime in 1942, when you would be forced into what you called an open ghetto.

Yes.

Tell us about that. Tell us what an open ghetto was and what happened.

We didn't know what to expect. August the 1st, 1942, we all were called to a sports stadium to register. So everybody, whatever we could, dressed the best to impress the Germans.

We arrived there. And we stood the whole day. My father kept saying, let's wait. Let's wait. Maybe they will send us home. They will change their minds.

Finally, by 10 o'clock at night, we approached the table. The tables were set up alphabetically. And so what happened?

[CRYING]

They detained my parents and my younger sister. And they took me, and my brother and me, shoved us off and say go home. I started to cry. And my father gave me the keys.

And I said I didn't want to go. So my father said somebody has to survive. And you will be the one. And I'm the only

one who survived.

At the time, I got some connections and things. They let them out. But three months later, I was sent out. Because there mostly was to register that the Germans had the names and the age and everything.

I was sent out. And my parents moved to a ghetto. Before, what I called an open ghetto, we were not allowed to walk or do anything on certain streets. They were just like the middle of the city we were allowed to move around. Schools were no more schools.

And after that, after I left, they had the big meet-- in 1942 when we met on the stadium, sports stadium, was mostly to register. The city wasn't big enough in this one place to accommodate all the Jewish people in one ghetto. So there were-- one ghetto was at one end of the city and another one they divided between A and B. We got B. And we were at the other end of the city.

Helen, before you would be forced into the closed ghetto, into B, before that time, one of the roles that you had was to get news for the family. Would you tell us a little bit about that?

We were not allowed to have radios. Everybody once somebody was hiding a radio, some people had to stay-- most people lived in apartments. We didn't have single houses.

Somebody had to stay in front of the building and watch out if a German policeman doesn't come in and he would shot you on the spot because consider you a spy, right away. And so if three men got together and started to talk about politics, I used to go to a relative who had a restaurant and listen in to the news, what they were talking, and bring it to my father. I was 13 years old, 14 years old. And to bring the news to my father.

Your father also called upon you, and if you'll tell us about this, too, once he lost his business and he no longer had things to trade, your father asked you to help go collect some debts owed to him.

He made me a list, that part, not too far, about maybe five, six miles away was the German border. That part belonged to Poland after the First World War. But the Germans renew the old borders.

So my father made me a list of customers what he trusted. And I took off. At the time, I don't know if I was 14. I took off my armband, pretending that I am not Jewish.

When I got to the border, the German guard said to me how come I don't have a permit. I said because I'm 13 years old. You had to have a permit from the time you were 14 years old.

So he trusted me. But he told me that I have to be back before 6 o'clock because the guards would change. And I could have some problems with it.

And I remember I came back. I brought some money with me. I don't remember 200 marks or something like that.

But you had gone and actually gotten it from these former customers?

Yes. He made me a list of people what he trusted. And I went. And I will never forget that day on the road when I walked back. It was just fields and the snow. It was February, I guess, 1943--

No, '42 probably.

'42. And-- no, maybe '41.

1940?

'41, '41. And the snow was beating on my cheek, on my right cheek. I was going back. By the time I came home, my

whole face was swollen and especially my right side from the snow beating on it. But I brought home some money.

When I look at my children and what the responsibilities as a teenager, during the war what we had, how careful we had to be, how to protect our parents. We were afraid to my father to go out. I used to bring the news. We were not allowed to have radios, like I said before. We couldn't afford to subscribe newspapers.

Because there was no income coming in. You were selling whatever you could. And I started to tell you that my mother had some jewelry. But when she sent us out, because she was so nervous being so close to the border, my father put us on a train and sent us to that small town. And so we buried everything.

It was a basement. And they had once a flood in the building. So they covered the flood with dirt. And the whole family, whatever they had in jewelry, even fabrics, but we didn't even go and look because the fabric just became nothing. And so we couldn't even sell it for bread.

After the war, some people, my uncle, one of my aunt's brother had a mill. And one of the sons survived, so she stayed. And his father, with his father survived, the boy was 15. And she stayed with us in the big city. And he went back to the small town to be able to get back the mill.

Do you know what happened? The Poles killed him because he came back for his property. So everybody, we were afraid to go back and dig out anything. It wasn't worth it. My eldest cousin and I said, you survived the war? And you will risk your life for some gold?

Helen you started to tell us about being forced into the closed ghetto. And your family went into ghetto B.

That's right.

Tell us what life was like in the ghetto.

I wasn't there a long time because they knew we changed the address. And they came and got me. I was there maybe a week or so.

But to give you a picture of it, that ghetto was B. We got B. And we got three rooms, a kitchen and two rooms, three families live. We got the kitchen.

And what you brought with you is two single beds, a table and chairs, some pots and pans and some clothing. Whatever you work all your life for, you left behind because material things are not important. Material things can be replaced. Life is important.

So I remember that I wasn't there long because the militia knew I was [INAUDIBLE]. We had our own government. So I went and complained that we don't-- the two other people, we didn't have any privacy because everybody had to go through the kitchen.

So I went as a speaker. I was 14 by that time, or whatever. And so a militia man recognized me. He was a friend of my cousin.

And he comes over to me. He said, what are you doing here? I said, I want to speak to the man who was in charge of housing. He said, look on the wall. And he points out to me my name is on the wall. He said go home.

And as I left, two militiamen were behind me. I came. My suitcase was always ready, because you didn't know, middle of the night, that who will come and get you out from bed. So my mother packed up and left. And I never seen them again.

And you were just 16 years of age at that point. And you were all alone. So where did you go from there, Helen?

From there, we were detained in a building what I went to school in. And from there, they sent us out. Was a man who was a buyer, with a cane, I remember. And we were all lined up and he picked his merchandise.

But I being, the first time in my life away from my parents, I attached myself to two friends of my cousin, what they were a little bit older, and one girl who went to school. And I stayed close to them.

We all went to the same camp. Because the men were lined up and he was picking the merchandise. But two of us work on one shift, and two work on another shift. So I wasn't with the other two.

He was picking you to be a slave laborer.

That's right, to work.

Tell us what kind of work they made you do?

I worked, they call it Deutsch [GERMAN]. It was a chemical factory. Actually, the main office was in Dusseldorf in the North of Germany. They built the factory in Gleiwitz because they were afraid that the planes at the time couldn't reach so far to the Polish border, closer to the Polish border.

So the Allies couldn't bomb it because it was so far away.

The bombing, so they built the factory closer to Polish border. Because today, Gleiwitz would shifting the border when Russia took part of Germany, Germany took part of Poland. And Gleiwitz is now in Poland.

So that was what I worked. They were building the factory. The men were building the factory. And we were operating after it was finished.

We produced black soot what was from fine coal and oil and high temperature. Every machine was as long, like, half of this area here with 12 windows in it, small windows and [? pilots, ?] And on the hour, you had to check.

Under one machine was a cement bag. And you had to pick it up and go to the front and weigh the thing for production. What more you cleaned the [? pilots, ?] more production came out. And each time you open that little window, there were 12 windows in each machine, and 12 machines multiplied by 12, 120?

144 windows.

134.

And so these big cylinders were very hot. You were filthy dirty.

We work 120 degrees.

Mhm.

And what were your hours that you were forced to work?

We actually work eight hours a day. But on weekends, in order to have one Sunday in three weeks, the two shifts had to work 12 hours. 12 hours a day and 12 hours a night, these machines were going 24 hours.

So you got one Sunday off every--

In three weeks.

--three weeks, every three weeks.

That's right. So you try to wash your underwear, do something for yourself.

Would you mind telling us about the nightgown you had from your mother?

Oh, before I left, my mother packed me, because it was winter time. As a child, I always wear pajamas. But my mother had flannel nightgown. So she put the flann-- that I will be cold in the winter. So she put her nightgowns for me.

The first night we were in the durchgangslager. How you explain durchgangslager-- the temporary camp. And we slept there. And when I got up, I couldn't believe. The first night I took off that nightgown, and lice were already in the seams. Because there were sick people sleeping there.

We didn't have mattresses. We had sacks with straw in it. But the beds, sick people were there. And it was infested with lice. And so we got them all, right away.

You still had a few photographs at this time, didn't you? You would lose them later.

I had photographs from my family.

In your pocket, right?

I had in mine. I was wearing a pair of pants. That was after they evacuated us. That was 1945 already.

And we were in a different place. And was a roll call. And we had to leave the room, the barrack.

So I didn't have time to put on my pants. And my pictures were in my pocket of the pants. By the time we got back to the barrack, all the pictures were confiscated. And I never had a picture of anybody.

You'd had them with you through the camps for several years before that happened. That's right. But that was almost toward the end of the war.

When you were at Gleiwitz working in the soot factory, besides the extraordinarily hard work conditions, what about the food? What did they feed you?

The food was two thin slices of bread. And it wasn't made with normal flour. And who knows what they did to it?

And they gave us a soup. The soup consisted of potatoes and sand. They never washed it properly, or spinach, rather. They never washed it properly.

Once on Sunday, if I didn't work on a Sunday, they gave us some meat. But the cook, we always laughed about it, the cook's thumb was so fat, big, that when he was holding the spoon, his thumb covered half of the spoon. So it wasn't much meat left on that spoon.

[LAUGHING]

Helen, at one point, if I remember right, you received a package. And you were told it was from your family, a packet with some bread in it, I think?

In the beginning, they used to allow, like, free, a sample, of one pound. And that was before our holiday Passover. And I arrived in March.

So I could tell in the piece of cake that my mother was released from the prison or if they killed her. I still don't know till today.

[CRYING]

That she didn't bake that. I know my mother, how she baked.

But they told you it was from your mother, didn't they? It said the address, and so on. I guess one of my aunts, my mother had five sisters and baked it and send it to me.

But you knew it wasn't your mother?

But at least it was such a comradeship and solidarity and everything between the family that my husband had aunts in my hometown, too. Nobody send him a package. His parents were already gone in 1942.

Well--

He's agreeing.

He's challenge me about the number?

When they called-- when they put the numbers on, when they used to be a labor camp, and when the SS came, they were sitting at tables. And we had to stay--

This is when the SS took over the camp?

That's right.

OK.

We had to stay completely naked how God created us in front of three SS men. What did the arm have to do with the rest of the body? But they try to take away your pride, your dignity, everything at the same time to tattoo the number on you.

I removed the number. I wasn't ashamed of it. But when my first child was 22 months old, he was reading already. And he kept asking me when he will have a number.

So I found a doctor who removed it. I couldn't explain to him. He was too young to understand.

Once the SS took over, then as you were just beginning to tell us, not only did they strip you of your dignity, but in every way, things turned far, far worse.

That's right.

What happened?

What happened, they put us in a small ghetto. You had to leave everything behind, all the furniture, everything. I said before what we took with us.

And we just live from hour to hour. We didn't know what the next day will bring. And the Germans formed a Jewish government. They were giving orders to these people. And one of my uncles work was as a counsel. And so he used to send-- once, what I was so surprised, middle of the night, he endangers his own son and sent him middle of the night to warn me not to sleep at home, that there will be, that night they will come to take you out from bed.

Helen, the one thing, if there's anything that you could say that was positive throughout all of that was that you met William.

Yes, but I didn't know that.

You didn't know that then. Would you tell us about meeting him? How that was even possible?

His cousin was my friend. And he worked in my hometown. She pointed him out to me once. And I liked his looks. I was a teenager.

[LAUGHTER]

So I ask her to introduce me to him. She never did. So can you imagine I come to the camp--

This is Gleiwitz?

--this is Gleiwitz. And my barrack was the first one by the fence. And I see on the other side of the fence was the men's camp. Who is there is like God was the matchmaker.

[LAUGHTER]

So I still didn't know him. How did I meet him? At one time, we didn't have water in our wash barracks. And there was a back door from the men's wash barrack that you could go and fetch some water.

So I went to get some water. And who is there washing his clothes? And a friend of his was there. He introduced us.

The next day, I am in my barrack. And somebody comes in and said somebody wants to talk to you by the fence. I go out. It's him. That's how it started.

And you got to know each other by talking over this fence?

Over the fence, yes. Once they opened, I don't know what was the idea behind, he doesn't agree with me, that the Germans use a lot of psychology. Once they ordered us and the men to get together. I guess they used psychology to realize that if a young man sees the opposite sex will give them more hope to go on, work harder and maybe to survive.

So he comes over to me and talks to me. And after he say to me, you will say you will survive and I will marry you.

You know what my reaction was? I didn't have any hope that I will survive. I touch his forehead. I thought that he has a high temperature.

[LAUGHTER]

He is not conscious what he is saying. That's how I felt about it. But eventually, we worked together. And we get evacuated. I took with a needle and thing, I made a little bag for him from a towel, the small towels we had that he put his piece of bread what they gave him.

You made this pouch for him to put his bread in.

That's right, his piece of bread. And after, we were separated. And I didn't know if he survived. And he didn't know if I survived.

And Helen, you were separated as the Russians closed in. You were forced--

We don't know about it. We didn't have any inkling what's going on, any information.

But they forced you out of there.

And they forced me, walked. And after three days' walking, they brought us back and put us on open cattle trains. And the transport was from Auschwitz already on these trains.

So we joined them. And we were for 12 or 14 days without any food. They gave you one piece of bread. That was January 1940. The only thing I remember--

In January 1945?

'45, yes, 1945. And I remember just that the only thing we had, that piece of bread, how did it last. That I had a blanket. And everybody was gathered, picking up from each other the snow, that at least we had water.

How did we survive for so many days without food? You can't imagine what a human body, how much it can take.

You mentioned that you were on the train 12, 14 days. Going hither and yon is how you put it to me one time.

But people were dying. And we were throwing them overboard. Some people tried to jump because there was a lot of snow on the ground. And some were killed.

But these were open cars?

Yes.

And at one point, at some point you went through [CROSS TALK].

That was to our benefit, because at least we had air.

Right.

The trains what they took my parents to Auschwitz, most of the people suffocated getting there. Because they didn't have any air at all, or a small window, something.

Helen, as the trains passed through Czechoslovakia, you told me that at least some of the Czechs tried to be helpful.

Yes. Some of the Czechs when we were on the trains, when we passed Czechoslovakia, some people stood on bridges and throwing bread to us. And my-- he was my husband at the time-- he caught in the air the bread.

He leaned over because they were open cattle trains. He leaned over, took the blanket that he doesn't hurt himself, and somebody was holding his feet that he doesn't fall over. And he caught a big bread, European bread in the air. The bread meant more that time than today a million dollars. And I don't exaggerate.

So you think he cared for me so much. I jumped in the wagon because I saw him. He was on the last of the men's transport. So I jumped on the first women that we could see each other.

And he broke the bread in half and said stretch out your arms. Guess what? The bread fell between the two trains. He never forgave me for that.

[LAUGHTER]

Because he could at least eat it himself. No, he wanted to share with me. And I was-- who was it, a Rose? What's his name, the reporter? Once he interviewed us, he worked for--

Charlie Rose.

Charlie Rose for CBS. He interviewed us. So he said why? She wasn't athletic? So he said she was a schlemiel. I don't

know.

[LAUGHTER]

That's what he told.

Helen, eventually they would force you to a place called Ravensbruck.

Yes.

Tell us about Ravensbruck.

When we arrived, I don't know after how many days, we reached Ravensbruck. Ravensbruck at the time had 32,000 prisoners, women, only women. Men were not there.

And the furnaces stopped already. That was 1945, about March or April. We didn't know what's going on, that it's almost the end, that Europe was liberated in June 1944. We didn't have any inklings at all.

Sometimes you thought the Germans used to wrap their lunch in newspaper. Sometimes in the factory, we picked up a piece of newspaper. They were always so victorious that they were winning the war.

So we lost hope. They said that was the end. So we didn't have any information what was going on.

And of course, you had no idea where Willie had gone at that time.

No, I didn't know where he is, if he's alive or not.

Right. So what happened to you at Ravensbruck?

Ravensbruck, we were not there too long. Do you know how the small-- how you call it, not beds but cots or something, five of us on one little narrow thing had to sleep.

And I had a piece of bread so you didn't have where to keep it. I put it under my head when I fell asleep. By the time I woke up, the bread was gone. It was nothing. But thank God, we were not there long, maybe one week.

From there, they send us away again. I work on a bombed airport cleaning up. I was peeling potatoes. That was a good job when they picked me to work in the kitchen. At least I was eating the potatoes. Because in Germany, they cooked the potatoes *pellkartoffeln*, they call it, in the skin. So we had to peel the cooked potatoes.

So at least I had enough potatoes to eat. And once I took home-- I had a pair underwear with elastic in it. And I was scared stiff to take a few potatoes with me to the barrack to share it with my friend. But I went through it.

It would not be long after that you would end up being liberated. Tell us about your liberation.

They were evacuating us again. The old guards were guards from Hungary, the old people. Because all the young people had to fight on the front, boys at 15, the Germans.

So the old guards-- we were evacuated. And we were walking. And we came to a rest place. And finally I saw civilians on the road. So I said to him, we'll catch up with you. Let us rest here.

And he didn't care. He really didn't care.

This was the guard. He didn't care?

The guard. So we just walked away. We were resting by a place. And a young German soldier in uniform stopped and started to flirt with us. I guess we still looked halfway decent.

[LAUGHTER]

And I looked at him. He didn't have a gun. He didn't have a belt.

And I remember my mother's stories what she was telling us after the First World War. A child could disarm a soldier. Because they didn't have the belt and they didn't have a gun.

I looked at him. He was in uniform, but he didn't have a gun. And I was the youngest one of the four. And I said to him, do you know who we are?

He said madchen, girls. And I admitted to him [GERMAN]. His eyes bulged out. And he just walked away.

And what did you say to him?

That we are Jews.

To this German?

[NON-ENGLISH], that's Jewish girls. And he just walked away. And I felt at that moment, I felt liberated, so strong that I got my hope back to go on, not to give up.

[CRYING]

He didn't care. But I was so brave because he didn't have a gun. Otherwise, I wouldn't be so brave.

No.

[LAUGHTER]

No. And Willie would agree. That's no schlemiel there. Tell us what happened then. Helen, you were liberated. But you would then get very sick.

I didn't actually see the actual liberation. My biggest regret is that I didn't see the mighty German downfall. Because a German woman invited-- oh, we were walking. And so we met, again, some Poles who were working there as forced labor.

And three men gave up their room, which they went to sleep in the barn. And four of us slept there. And the German woman invited us for supper. And a farmer's supper consists of a pitcher of milk, a pitcher of rendered pork, and some mashed potatoes.

And I saw that combination, not because it wasn't kosher. I just was so-- my stomach couldn't tolerate it. So they took me to the hospital. I had typhoid.

So actually my only regret is that I didn't witness the actual downfall of the mighty German army. I still regret it today.

And did you really fully realize you had been liberated until after you got out--

Yeah, the Russians liberated us. So we were afraid of the Russians also. Not for the reason because I'm Jewish or anything. We were afraid they were soldiers hungry, that they can rape us.

So I mean, we took over a villa, an empty little house. And being the youngest one, I was the smartest from them, if I

may say so. Because I made a sign. And in Polish, zaraza means a quarantine, and it's in Russian, too, and put it on the front of the door. So nobody bothered us.

That was very smart.

[LAUGHTER]

You had to look for ways how to survive.

Well, I know that as our time starts to get short, Helen, I know everybody's going to want to know very much how you found Welek, William again. Would you tell us how you were able to find each other?

I was leaving Poland. I was for two months in my hometown.

So you made it back to Sosnowiec?

Yes. And somebody gave us a ride. You can't imagine the situation after the war.

I remember we wanted to get on a train. People were hanging on the outside of the train. And everybody wanted to go back home. Finally, we made it to Sosnowiec. We all were from Sosnowiec, all four of us.

And somebody comes over to me at the station and said you have a home here. My cousin who was liberated from Auschwitz, and Auschwitz was liberated January 1945, we were not liberated till May the 8th, 1945. So she was right back home.

And had been for a while?

That's right, almost a half a year. And her sister came and another cousin. And I arrived.

And the girl at the station told me you have where to go. My friend had her uncle, who was one of the richest people in our town. He survived. He was hidden and he survived with his son.

So she had a home. And I had. The two others, I don't know where, they had to go and look for something.

So I had the cousin. I had home. But my cousin and her fiance decided that they want to go, leave Poland, and to go to Germany under American occupation.

Because you're still under the Russians now?

That's right. And so I asked them if I can go with them. Five of us went. We got to Germany, back to Germany. And my cousin had a cousin who lived in Weiden in Bavaria.

We got there. And we stayed overnight. I just was watching Kissinger the other day on television. And he was talking German. They were videotaping him for something. His hometown, we stay overnight. Because it was the closest to the Czech border.

So we couldn't go any further. And we stayed in Furth. He was born in Furth, Germany. And from there, we got to Weiden.

We were seven people in one room living. Three were sleeping on the floor. But whoever could help, people were not selfish at all. Everybody was in the same situation. Everybody lost everything.

So from there, I don't know. I don't remember. Oh, when I was going to Weiden, I was in Prague. And in Prague, I am getting on a streetcar.

And a girl who was from Prague who was mine overseer, Edith calls me, called my name. And I was on the steps of the streetcar. I stepped back. And she said I saw Willie in Prague. She told me that.

I said, where? What? She said I don't know. I saw him in the Jewish Community Center in Prague.

In Prague, Czechoslovakia?

So that's the only thing I knew. But so my cousin's fiancée, I didn't want-- we had to leave Prague to go further. And he said I will go and look for him.

He went, because it was a Jewish center something there. He came back. He said I couldn't find him. He didn't live there. He was visiting somebody or looking for somebody. That's right.

And I lost track again. So people were going from place to place. They were-- no communication at all, how to get around. And two girls came, because we stayed with my cousin's cousin. It wasn't my close relative, but her close relative.

And two girls came from the same town. And they were talking that they lived in Bayreuth. You know what Bayreuth is famous?

No. The Richard Wagner's Festspielhaus.

Oh.

It's in his name in Bayreuth. So she said who is there in Bayreuth? And she started to mention names. And she mentioned his name. That's how I found out.

He heard that I survived. But he didn't know where I am. And I found out that he survived, but I didn't know how to get in touch with him. At least she pointed out that it was Bayreuth. That it wasn't too far by train to go.

So I sent him a little note. I didn't know how he feels. Maybe he changed his mind, you know, long time. So I wouldn't be angry at him.

But you didn't have an address. So you just sent it to Bayreuth?

I couldn't send to that. And she said oh, he's not. He is in Prague. The girls knew every move where he is.

[LAUGHTER]

So she said but he will be back on Thursday. He just had a permit from a lieutenant governor in Bayreuth who was American and gave him a permit. People used to come that time from Russia back, a lot of people who were more left-oriented went during the war, young people, to Russia.

So they were coming back. And everybody wanted to come to the American zone. So he had a permit from Captain Cooley. I remember the names, so many years, a Captain Cooley gave him a permit to bring these people over to the American zone. Because over there, Russia was occupying Czechoslovakia at the time.

But William was allowed to go bring them into the American zone?

So she said, he will be back Thursday. The girls, like I said before, knew when he's coming back. So it's Thursday, it's Friday, it's Saturday, it's Sunday, no Willie. So I gave up. He doesn't care.

And at the time, we were getting an apartment. They took over a big hotel. And we got one room in that building. And

he came there because somebody told him that we moved, my cousin and I.

But I was still in the old place. So he got to that Cafe Weiss. And somebody was there and brought him. And my cousin, stupid, I couldn't find-- she couldn't hold on. I was on the third floor.

And she calls me, throw down the key. In Germany, every building is on the key. But she couldn't hold on to tell me who's there. So I got so nervous, I couldn't find the key. And I had to knock at the neighbor to give me a key to let them in.

And he came in. I remember what he was wearing, a brown suit and very long jacket. And he gave me a man's watch. And he said we'll get married.

[LAUGHTER]

And I said with what? Didn't have a pair of shoes, even. I was wearing-- my cousin was sharing her clothes with me because I didn't have anything. I had a pair of shoes what a German woman gave me. And the first rain, I lost them. They didn't fit right.

So he wanted to go dancing. So he bought me the first pair of shoes, my first pair of shoe with a heel. And we got a fabric.

And I found a Viennese designer. And I borrowed a machine. And she was sewing for us. So she made me a black dress and a blue dress and a skirt. That's all what I could afford it.

And so I was the best dressed that time. Everything by a designer, Viennese designer, how she pressed every piece of fabric, even, before she cut it out. Anyhow, that's how we met.

And if I remember right, somehow or another an uncle left Willie a really old Ford tractor, right?

No truck, a Ford.

An old--

An old Ford, a car.

An old Ford, which he then sold to be able to pay for your wedding.

Oh, yes. We wanted to make a wedding. Listen, we didn't have parents to make a wedding. So he sold the car.

And he had to go to another city to buy kosher meat. I cook the wedding party myself. I almost fainted. You know, I don't know how many of you seen a Jewish wedding, what you stay under, like a--

Under the chuppah?

Chuppah, yes. And I almost fainted. Because I was observing the rules and regulations, the bride is supposed to fast before. But I cooked, too. We had 50 people for the wedding, a cantor, and a rabbi.

And I got one gift just, some marks, 100 or 200 marks. I paid the rabbi with it.

[LAUGHTER]

That's the gifts I got. Nobody had anything. You can't be angry.

Helen, let me ask you. We're at almost time to close. It would still take you a couple of years living in displaced person

camps before you were able to get to the United States. And you got here in 1949. How were you able to come to the United States?

Because he was in Munich, he would try a friend of ours with a wholesale, with stockings. So he didn't have money, he gave him on credit. And he used to sell to other people who were in the little businesses, the stockings.

And he was in Munich to pay off the rest payment. Because the man was leaving and went to Israel. And after we came to Israel, after many years, we went and visit the man.

He said you were a schlemiel, he tells him. Because you came purposely to Munich to pay me? So he said to him, how could I face you now if I wouldn't pay you.

So with what we had, so he registered. And two months later, they called us for examinations because the Americans didn't let anybody, if you had one little spot on the lungs or something, you were not allowed to enter America. So one X-ray he had, so big, I showed it to my son who is a doctor. He said how could they tell from such a small little X-ray? So they took another X-ray, larger one. And he had calcification just from a cold, like bursitis or something.

And so we came to America. We were a week or so in a special camp near-- in Bremerhaven. We left from Bremen, came to America, directly to Washington, DC. Every city except the Jewish organizations, accepted a certain amount of displaced persons, DPs.

And ours was-- we were very lucky-- Washington, DC, not knowing the language, not knowing a soul, how many things. The Jewish organization JSSA, used to give us \$30 a week, paid our rent what was \$30 a month, and send us to Americanization school. And we are still very grateful. I support them still that they can do the same thing for other people.

And I remember, this is funny. We were walking-- we didn't know anybody-- on 14th Street. And I saw black limos in front, stained glass. And I didn't know what-- I read it funeral home in Polish. I didn't know what it means. I thought it's a nightclub.

[LAUGHTER]

The stained glass, limos in front.

Funeral home.

It was very hard. We were really greenhorns. But not anymore!

Helen, you, of course, and as we said at the very beginning, you built a whole new life. And now you have three children, two doctors, an attorney. And I wish that we could spend more time not only hearing more about what you could have shared with us during the Holocaust and the war, but how you were able to establish your new life here. I'm going to turn back to Helen in just a couple of moments to close our program.

But I'd like to thank all of you for being here. Remind you that we will have a First Person program each Wednesday until the end of August and each Tuesday until the end of July. Our next First Person program will be tomorrow. So that's June the 24th, when our First Person will be Mr. Fritz Gluckstein who is from Germany. Mr. Gluckstein survived the Holocaust by managing to stay in Berlin throughout the war, despite several arrests and other very close calls. We hope that you can come back tomorrow, if you are in town. And some other time, and if not this year, put it on your agenda for a trip to Washington, DC next year.

I'd like to remind you that if you go to the museum's website, you can hear the conversations that are recorded from the First Person program. And you can get excerpts on podcasts as well as through iTunes.

It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. And so with that, I'd like to turn to Helen to

close. And before I do, because we didn't have time for questions of Helen, she will step down off the podium over here, off the stage. And so if you want to come up and meet her and say hi to her or ask her a question, absolutely feel free to do that. You're ready for that, right?

Yes. And I didn't tell any sad stories to you. I'm sure you know about it. And you heard them before.

I want to close with in telling you my story today, I hope to do more than provide you with a vivid memory to share. I hope that you will become convicted about speaking out against the kinds of things that created the Holocaust. The event that happened to me in the past are still active today when people deny the Holocaust and make anti-Semitic statements. These problems of genocide are still active in places, such as Darfur and Congo. Human beings everywhere always need within their community individuals who are willing to speak out about serious injustices which can lead today to events like the Holocaust.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is an institution dedicated to helping such individuals be aware and able to speak out. I hope after hearing my story, you will join me in working toward that good cause. Please come visit me in the museum and look at our resources online. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]