

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 Goldkind, whom we shall meet shortly. This 2009 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Doris Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring First Person. And I'd like to let that Mr. Louis Smith is with us in the audience today.

[APPLAUSE]

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each First Person guest serves as a volunteer here with this museum. Today ends our First Person programs on Tuesdays for this year, but we will continue our Wednesday First Person programs through August 26.

The museum's website, at [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)-- that's [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)-- provides a list of the upcoming First Person guests until the end of August.

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. A number for this year have already been posted, and Helen's will be posted sometime in the next few weeks. The First Person podcast joined two other museum podcast series-- Voices on Antisemitism, and Voices on Genocide Prevention. The podcasts are also available through iTunes.

As most of you know, on June 10th, a man came to this museum and tragically took the life of Officer Stephen Johns. Officer Johns, in giving his life, and his fellow officers stopped the gunman before he could cause more horror and harm more people here in this museum. We ask you to join us for a moment of silence in honor of Officer Johns and his family.

Our First Person today, Helen Goldkind, will share her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust, and as a survivor, for about 40 minutes or so. Depending upon time, we hope to have an opportunity for you to ask Helen some questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have a few announcements and requests of you. First, if possible, we ask that you stay seated throughout our one-hour program. That way, we minimize any disruptions for Helen as she speaks. Second, if we have time for a question and answer period at the end of the program, and you have a question, we ask that you ask your question and make it as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so everyone in the room, including Helen, hears the question, and then she'll answer you.

If you have a cell phone or a pager that has not yet been turned off, we ask that you do that at this time. If you have passes for the permanent exhibition today, please know that they are good for the entire afternoon. So you can comfortably stay with us and then go to the permanent exhibition.

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims-- 6 million were murdered. 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 tyranny.

More than 60 years after the Holocaust, hatred, antisemitism, and genocide still threaten our world, as we so dramatically saw here on June 10th. 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 it occurs.

What you are about to hear from Helen Goldkind is one person's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief

slide presentation to help with her introduction. I'm experiencing just a little bit of a technical difficulty up here so I can't see the screen. So I'll keep glancing over my shoulder just to make sure I'm in the right place, so please bear with me as I do that.

We begin with this portrait of Helen Lebowitz Goldkind. Helen was born in 1928 in Volosyanka, Czechoslovakia. Helen was one of seven children born to a close-knit Jewish family. On this map of Europe, the arrow points to Czechoslovakia.

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

On this map of Czechoslovakia, the arrow points to Uzhgorod.

Helen's family was deported to Auschwitz. The arrow on this map of major Nazi camps shows the location of Auschwitz. Helen was sent to work on a forced labor brigade in a Nazi munitions factory, at another camp. Toward the end of the war, Helen was sent to the Bergen-Belsen camp. The arrow on this map indicates the route from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen.

And here, we see a photo of Bergen-Belsen. Helen was liberated from Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945. And here, we see a photo of liberated survivors.

Helen emigrated to the United States in 1946. And we close our slide presentation with a photo of Helen at her wedding to Abe Goldkind in 1947. And I'll leave that with you for a moment.

Helen came to the United States in 1946. She married her husband, Abe, in 1947. They would move from Richmond, Virginia to Baltimore soon after their marriage. Helen and Abe had three children-- one daughter is a microbiological biologist with the United States Army, and their other daughter is a psychologist. Their son is a gastroenterologist with the United States Navy.

Helen and Abe would eventually move to Florida, but Helen moved back to the Washington DC area in 2000 after Abe passed away, so that she could be close to her children and grandchildren.

Helen has eight grandchildren, ranging in ages from 14 to 32. And she has seven great-grandchildren. Helen volunteers at the membership and donor desk, where you will find her on Thursdays. She also speaks frequently to groups here at the museum, as well as in other settings. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Helen Goldkind.

[APPLAUSE]

So just be comfortable.

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

You're welcome.

When Czechoslovakia was partitioned and then occupied by Hungary, you were living in the town, your hometown, of Volosyanka.

Right.

Your family had lived there for several generations. Before we talk about the coming of war and the Holocaust, share with us a little bit about your early years, what life was like for you and your family in your hometown of Volosyanka.

Well, actually, it was a very happy life, because my mother had six brothers and a sister, and they had children. And it was a family life. I don't know how to explain it any better.

But I was a very happy child. It was wonderful living near grandparents-- they're so protective of you. Especially when you're seven-- I always loved running there to my grandparents. It was wonderful.

We saw that your father had a shoe store. Tell us about your father and your mother. Tell us what you can about them.

Well, I had very good parents. My father had a Bata store. But the Hungarians were allied-- the Hungarians occupied Czechoslovakia, but they were Allied with the Jews. And being that the Bata store was a franchise, so Jews were not allowed to own a franchise. So he was just doing whatever he could to make a living.

But we had a cow, I remember, and my grandparents had cows. So we had enough milk and bread. We didn't have luxury, but we survived all right. And especially, we were still together-- that was the main thing.

Helen, you had an uncle who was a pretty high-ranking person in the Czech army. Can you say just a little bit about that?

Oh, my God, matter of fact, I have a picture of him. That the Czechs were really a democracy. I think if they would leave them alone, Europe would have been like America. Actually, the Czechs didn't care whatever you are, but if you had the capabilities, this is what counted. So this is him.

That's your uncle.

My mother's brother, yeah.

Helen, you had told me that you had described your synagogue as a beautiful synagogue. And you remember that, don't you?

Oh, I remember our synagogue was a beautiful synagogue. It was made out of stone. And everything that went on-- like weddings and all that-- was done in that synagogue. I have very good memories about that synagogue. I even remember when we were going to the synagogue, my father holding my hand, and my I had a little brother, six years old.

And I feel his warm hand. It was a good time.

Helen, besides your brothers and sisters, did you have a large extended family?

Yes. Very large.

Lots of cousins?

Yeah, yeah. And to tell you the truth, you know, I had an aunt that was born here in the United States. She came to Europe visiting with her parents, so my uncle happened to fall in love with her, and they got married. They had two gorgeous kids. And she was planning on going home to the United States, but she got caught in the war.

But she still thought that no matter what happened-- we didn't foresee this tragedy.

Of course not.

But she felt she was safe because she was an American.

When Hungary occupied your community, you and your family and neighbors lived under Hungarian rule for several years. Tell us what you remember about the changes that were forced on you once the Hungarians took control of

Volosyanka, and your community, and your surrounding country?

Well, I have many, many friends, and a lot of them were non-Jews. You know, I had the cousins to play with, but you know, I remember walking to school with friends that weren't Jewish. And I could sit near anybody that I wanted to, you know, near my friend, near my cousin. It didn't make any difference.

In the classroom, for example, no difference?

No problem. But when the Hungarians came in, I had to sit in the back. And we were never called on. And I was little, I couldn't understand why yesterday, she was my friend, and all of a sudden they were pulling back. You know? Evidently, they were told at home that if your friend is Jewish, try to pull back.

And that's what happened. When we came home, that went on, and we came home and we told our parents, they never call on us, we're just there in the back and nobody even bothers with us. So my father was very much for books, and he wanted his kids to be educated. So there-- he went and hired a teacher that was let go because he was a Jew.

So he came to our house, and he was teaching us. You know, we were seven kids, so there was a class by itself. But then, after a while, after a while, the Jews from the town did send their kids to our house and our house became a school, sort of for the Jewish children.

A real classroom, and the numbers grew there?

Yes, yes.

And were you still going to the public school at all? Or were you no longer--

No, we were taken out because we were wasting our time.

Right.

We were wasting our time. That's what our parents--

And that's the time when your father lost his shoe business, as well.

Yes, right.

And once he had lost it, his livelihood, how did the family make ends meet so that you could eat and get by?

Well, as I said before, we had a cow. So we had milk. And my grandparents lived nearby, and they also had a cow or two. And so we had enough milk and bread. We didn't have any luxury-- there were potatoes, so we had potatoes.

But it was as I said before, it was OK because we were together. And so we didn't eat meat, we didn't eat a lot of things. It didn't bother us.

But at least your basic needs were being taken care of at that time?

Yes.

Of course, Helen, that would all change tremendously once the Germans came. And once they occupied Czechoslovakia and Hungary, they included taking over your town, by then, you were an early teenager. Tell us what happened to your community and your family once the Nazis were now in control, and completely in power in Volosyanka.

That's a tough one to talk about. Once the Germans came in, we-- see what happens to me?

Take your time.

Once the Germans came in, they told that all the houses have to have a Star of David on the house. And we weren't allowed to go out after a certain hour.

They closed the synagogue. But my grandfather was a religious-- I mean, we were religious Jews. So the older people went to my grandfather to pray, because he had a Torah scroll. He had six sons, so they managed to get a Torah scroll out of that synagogue.

In order to save it?

In order to save it. And so the Jews weren't allowed to gather. So the religious Jews took-- you know, old Jews, they took a chance, and they went to my grandfather. So my grandfather's house became a synagogue. They gathered there.

And in no time, in no time, the Germans gave out an order that all the Jews should go to the square. But what they also said, that we can pack a small suitcase and take it with us, because we're going to be on a farm. And then we'll come back.

So everybody worried, what should we take? And locking the doors. And my grandfather, all he wanted it is the Torah scroll. Because he says, listen, our civilization comes from the Torah scrolls, from the Ten Commandments. And how are we going to live, who knows where? So he felt it was very important for him to have the Torah scroll.

So my grandmother ran and she wrapped the Torah scrolls in a white sheet, I remember. And we went to the square. When we got to the square, they took us with trucks to Uzhhorod, and that was a ghetto. We were sleeping on the floor-- it was a brick factory, that ghetto was made out of a brick factory.

And we really didn't know what tomorrow will bring.

So the whole Jewish community was forced into a brick factory?

Right. But my grandfather had a long beard, so they gave an order for the old people to come to the square. So my mother took my grandfather to the square, and they took these Jews and they were cutting their beards. And they were beating them up.

But there was nothing my mother could do, because when she would have-- oh, my God. She would get beaten up. So when they were finished with this old men-- my grandfather was 86-- when they were finished with this old men, my grandmother-- my mother brought him home and he was all bloody. And he was black and blue.

And he wouldn't talk. I have never seen my father cry. Never. And that night, he was crying just to see what they did to a 96-year-old man. He didn't talk for a few days.

And so my mother didn't know what to do with him. He wouldn't eat, he wouldn't talk. My mother had a scarf, so she said-- she ran and hid his face in that scarf and put his hat on.

All of a sudden, he says, I know you all worried that I'm in pain. But actually, that's how they humiliated me that hurt more.

The pain of his humiliation versus--

Yes.

--the physical pain?

Yes, but I'm sure that he was in pain plenty.

Absolutely. And did your grandfather go with you into the ghetto?

Well, then, a few days later, I don't know why they had to do this to him, because they knew where we were going to wind up. So a few days later, they took us to the train station. And my grandfather, my grandmother, we were all there together. They packed us into cattle cars, you know. I don't know how many there were, but there was only like standing room only.

So there were old people, and they couldn't stand up, so you know, it was like terribly crowded. I remember I stood on my sister's shoulders, and I saw people working on the farms.

So you were able to look out up high?

Yes, I couldn't-- I was sort of-- I couldn't see it. But if somebody held me up, I could see. So the people were showing me this.

The people outside were doing this?

Yes, but you see, we couldn't imagine what that meant, because they never had a place where there were gas chambers waiting for us. You know, there are wars-- there are wars today, unfortunately, but to get to a place where you go into a gas chamber, that never happened. So it didn't even register what they meant.

But they did try to show us what's going to happen. And when we got to Auschwitz, there was a big sign, a round sign to say, [SPEAKING GERMAN], that means work makes-- work makes the person free, you know. So we still thought we're on a farm.

But the smell that came in from the outside-- so we came in, it was fairly light. And so they didn't open up the doors. They were waiting until it's a little bit darker. So the smell was coming in, like the burning flesh.

So we said, well, they're going to let us out. We'll see what's going on. But we knew already it's not a farm. Why would that smell be there?

So it got darker. And we saw big chimney. And we saw a-- we saw like a fire. But when we got to Auschwitz, they were capable of gassing 10,000 people. And they couldn't get rid of the corpses, so they just threw them on that pit, and that was probably the smell.

And they were screaming, [GERMAN], means, get out, get out. My grandfather took the Torah scrolls, and he was gone. And forgive me, but I have to call them the monsters. And these monsters came over to him, and they told him to throw down the Torah scrolls. And he was trying to tell them, it's a sin. It's a sin.

And when my mother saw that he was getting beaten up, and she ran over to him, and she told-- she told him to throw it down. And he wouldn't listen to her.

So he just kept hanging on to it?

He kept on hanging on to it. And then, they were screaming at us, we should go to the right. My mother was still with us and she was holding on to my little brother. I have a picture of him.

And my-- I don't know what happened, but I remember I looked back. And I saw he was on the ground. But these monsters were still beating him, you know, I could see them beating him. And I cried out from my heart because I couldn't cry out with my mouth.

So you know, somebody go and help him. I didn't know why they're doing this to him. Nobody came to save him. Nobody.

And then, as we were going to the right, my mother was holding on to my six-year-old brother.

This is Efriam?

Yeah, yeah. And he had a book, he loved books. You know, we never got any toys. Because we didn't feel like we're missing anything, but we did get a book on our birthday. And he loved this book and he was carrying it. And my mother was afraid that they're going to come and beat him up because he had to throw it away.

So she was negotiating with him, and he went and gave my mother the book, and he had to watch how she throws that book away. And poor kid, he was so upset and crying-- he couldn't understand why he cannot have this book that he loved so much.

And so he cried. And all of a sudden, a monster comes over and he was pulling my little brother away from my mother, so there was a tug of war. But he was stronger. So he pulled my little brother away from my mother, and my mother was screaming. He was only six years old. How is he going to survive?

So she ran after him, and they would beat her up. And she fell, and they kicked her around. And I remember when she got up, she was full of blood already. And that's when they pulled-- pushed her to the left.

And that's where you lost her?

I'll just drink a little water. I'm sorry. I'm a little emotional.

Helen, tell us-- of course, that's where you lost your mother.

That's where I saw my mother last.

And what happened to you next?

What happened to me next? Next, they were shaving-- they took us into a place and they shaved our heads. And they gave us showers. But we were quite a few girls, so it took a long time.

So after they shaved our heads, and they did give us a shower, and wooden clogs and a bowl. And then, after a shower, we put on this striped dress. And when they were finished with all the girls, they took us to a barrack.

But when-- I want to just bring this out. They had it planned so when we were going to the shower, on both sides, there were flowers and trees. You know, you would never, never think that they are gas chambers in back of them and they're burning my family there.

And when we went back it was dark already. So we couldn't see it. But when we were going to the shower, you could see. Who plants flowers when you go to a gas chamber? But they did.

And when we came back, they put us back into a barrack. And I couldn't sleep. I couldn't sleep, and they put-- you know, they were like bunk beds there. So I was on the top somehow with my sister.

Is this Sylvia?

Yeah. And there was a crack, and I saw on the wires people hanging. I said, Sylvia, this is not a farm. Look what's going on there? She says, well, in the morning, we'll find out what's going on. Zahlappell-- they took us out around 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock-- we didn't have a clock or watches. We didn't have anything.

And we had to stay there for an hour, and we saw people hanging from these wires. We didn't know they were electric wires, but that's what it was.

And they had-- the Nazis had left them hanging on the fences?

And the Nazis left them hanging on the fences to say, don't try, you'll never get out of here. And after a few days, they were on these fences, then a crew came with pitchforks and they were taking them off.

Helen, you and your sister Sylvia would be selected for slave labor. Tell us what they forced you to do and where you went from there? And you and Sylvia were now together.

Well, when we came from Auschwitz, we went to a train, and we were in the trains-- we were already in the cattle cars. So we heard a noise, and we thought they're going to bomb Auschwitz because there was still some Jews in Europe to bring them in. And we thought they're going to bomb Auschwitz-- but bomb something, bomb the railroads.

But after a while, you heard these noises, vroom, vroom, something. We knew that there are bombs falling. And after a while, maybe 45-- I don't know exactly how long-- the noise stopped. And the train took off.

We found ourselves someplace in Germany. And first, they took us to the munition factory and gave everybody a job. And they put me near a machine to fill these bombs in-- they called it sprengstoff in German, but I suppose it was gunpowder, a yellow, very, very hot powder. And I had to fill these bombs, you know, with my whole body, put it in that wagon. And many times I got burned.

And you know, I was riding with the smell that's poisonous. So we did that. I did that. And all the girls were--

You were 16 years old, and you're doing this incredibly heavy labor.

I don't know if I was already 16. So anyway, whatever it was, I had to do this. Anyway, after a while, we were hungry, it was cold.

Well, anyway, then when they showed us what we need to do. They took us to a barrack. OK, the barrack was quite far-- I don't know why the barrack was so far from the factory. But we had to walk.

And when we walked, we walked in the snow. And many times, these clogs would fall off your feet. So whoever was lucky, and they had a piece of string found on the street, or someplace, they would tie their-- they would tie their clogs so that they don't fall off. Or sometimes they would take a piece of rope, and if they found a piece of paper, they would put it near our bodies--

To insulate with a little paper or something?

Paper, or whatever-- it may be sometimes a rag, I don't know. So it was very, very, very difficult. In the morning, we got a slice of bread and coffee-- they called it coffee, whatever it was. But at night-- when we got home for lunch, it was nothing. At night, when we came home, we got a soup from potato peels. But there was sometimes a potato.

And I knew that I cannot go on. I felt I'm going-- after a while, I'm talking-- it wasn't a day--

And every day, you're marching that long distance to the munitions factory doing that hard labor, and then march back to the barrack?

Right. So after a while, I just felt I'm not going to make it, I'm going to fall someplace on the road. So I figured out-- a lot of girls were doing this. Because first of all, they were poisoned for-- they were-- at night, they closed the doors and the windows so that they shouldn't be bombed. So there was no ventilation there.

And all these toxic fumes from filling the bombs?

Yes, our eyes were yellow, our bodies, our little bit of hair was like orangey. It didn't look like people anymore.



Well, one day, I just felt I'm not making it. So I didn't-- so I didn't know how to do away with myself. And I just wouldn't go out to the zählappell.

And that was the roll call where you're ordered to come out and line up?

Right. So my sister looked for me and she couldn't find me. So she came into the barrack, and she saw me there laying. And she picked me up. And I thought she was going crazy because the way she picked me up and she was shaking me. And I said to myself, you know, I'm dying, and she's crazy, that's it.

The people that went to the gas chambers, they didn't the world knows about it. And if anybody is going to survive this, please tell the world. So she had this thing in her that she needs to survive to tell the world that this is happening in the world.

So she pulled me out-- she pulled me out, actually. And she was trying to bribe me. She said, you know, I know you're hungry, I know you're cold, but I'm going to give you a piece of bread of mine. So you can hold on to your life.

And so I went out with her. And then, she was trying-- if a German didn't look, she was trying to come to my machine so that I can catch my breath, because this was going on for a whole day, just to stay there was an effort for me. So she would help me out here and there.

And finally, you know, after a long time, I'm just going in from one to the other. Finally, the factory was bombed. And they brought us back to the barracks, and they didn't open the door. We were always locked from the outside. And we took a look outside and we saw it's already daylight.

And nobody's opening up the door. So we thought they're just going to put the barracks on fire. And it's going to be the end. But some civilians came with a pickup truck, a half truck-- it wasn't a whole truck-- and they put us in the truck. And they say, we're no longer being needed, and they're taking us someplace else.

They didn't talk about Bergen-Belsen, but we wouldn't have known what Bergen-Belsen is anyway, right. We were about 2,000 girls in that factory, maybe there was 400 or 500 left, I don't know.

We all got into this little pickup truck. And we got to Bergen-Belsen-- we saw the name Bergen-Belsen, and they opened up a barrack. And in that barrack, I want to tell you something.

I don't think anybody ever saw anything like that because it was close to the end to the war. And a lot of Germans left the place. But there was plenty still there, but they didn't come to open up the door. So people were doing everything that they had to, and there were a lot of dead already. And people delirious, the lice were that big, and the insects.

And we had no place to sit, me and my sister. So there were a few dead people near the wall. So we moved them a little bit away. And so we sat there. And we knew, we were just waiting for us to die. It was--

You had said to me that there's probably no greater hell than Bergen-Belsen.

I was going to say that hell isn't as horrible as Bergen-Belsen was. Yeah.

Finally, they opened up the doors. And we were liberated by the English. They opened the door, and they see a horrible thing. It was hell-- hell on Earth.

So they called-- they were afraid of us then. They called Eisenhower to come and see this, because they never faced something like that. Well, wherever Eisenhower goes, there goes the newsmen and the photographers. So they were snapping pictures, and that's why I see him up there.

And then, my sister got sick from the lice, from insects. So they took her away, right away. And they took her away, I

thought they were going to bring her back tomorrow. I didn't know that she was-- she was delirious. She didn't come back.

So I went to look for her because when the occupation took place, when there were some times when the people were dying, they took their names, yet. They asked them. So I figured maybe she is somewhere there dead, and I'll read it. I'll read the sign, and I'll find her where she is.

So as I was walking, I saw like a mountain was moving. And I knew that the mountain doesn't move. So I came closer.

What happened was, there were so many lice and insects on the top of those corpses, that from far away, or maybe I was just so sick, you know, I thought the mountain was moving. So evidently what happened, I must have fell down there.

And when I fell down, my heart, you know, I looked like a skeleton with a heartbeat. But the English, they saw that somebody would move, I must have moved my leg or a foot, so they came. And they saw that I still have a heartbeat. They picked me up. They picked me up, and they put me in a makeshift hospital-- they put up from tent, they made hospitals.

But I don't remember how I got there. I really don't remember. And after a while, after a while, I could lift my head up by my elbows. And I was looking for my sister. I knew she came to Bergen-Belsen. And I looked and looked, I couldn't find her face.

And so I fell back and I cried. And the nurse comes over to me, she says, why are you crying? You're getting better. I just said, you know what, I want to die. My life is not worth living. I didn't want to live alone.

Well, I knew I was getting a little better because I could lift my head.

Right.

Oh, she says, but what was your sister's name? I told her. And what they did, they went around-- there were more of these tents evidently that I didn't know. So they went around looking, is there a Sylvia Lebowitz? And they found her, they did find her.

But she was very, very, very sick. And so was I. So she came and told me that they did find her. And I looked at her and I said to myself, if she's lying to me, that would be really cruel. Because then I started having hope that I would see her all right.

And took about a couple of weeks, something like it. And they did bring her to my tent.

And she was recovering?

She was recovering with me together.

And so you and Sylvia, at least, were now together again. Would you mind, Helen, sharing with us the story you told me about your cousin, Freddie.

Oh, my God. As I was looking, as I walked, I walked to look for my sister, the Germans--

This was before you ended up in A field hospital?

Yeah-- what the Germans did, they put ropes around the ankles of the dead ones, or whoever they found. And they were pulling them to put them on this mountain, whatever.

And he-- and I looked down and it looked like my cousin.

He's pulling what you think is a corpse?

Yeah. But I looked down, and he looked like Freddie. But he had big ears, I remember. And I screamed, I said, Freddie!

He opened his eyes. And this German got scared, so he took away the ropes from his legs. And he left them there, or whatever.

And then, I fainted. And I wound up in-- but I was telling my sister that.

That you've seen Freddie.

That Freddie's alive. She says, oh, you were sick. You imagine it. But Freddie did survive.

But he doesn't remember that incident. He just doesn't remember that incident.

But he attached himself to you and your sister once he was well?

Oh, it was a big problem, because he became Lebowitz.

He changed his name to your name, right? Yeah.

And he had an uncle in America, and then, that nephew is Lebowitz, so they had a problem getting him here. It's because we didn't want to be separated. We didn't want to be separated. It caused some troubles.

Because he was-- then he had to prove himself that he is Milbauer so the uncle can bring him out here. So that took time. But he did come.

He did come. Helen, you would end up being sent to Sweden for care. Tell us about going to Sweden, and what that was like for you.

OK, the Swedish Red Cross took out 600 girls. I believe-- of course, they didn't tell me-- and I believe they took out the sick ones and fairly young, because the older ones didn't have a chance to survive, as sick as they were. So they took-- I was between the 600. And my sister was between the 600.

And they took us with-- they take sick people on stretchers. And they got us in-- we were in Sweden. And they were very nice, you know, they were watching us, to tell you the truth. We really looked like skeletons. And I was full eaten up from lice, and the spring stuff was hot, burned out, you know.

And I used to look at them because this is the kind of people I knew. And here I come from a world with monsters. I didn't know that there are people-- still people left that could even feed me, doing these things. But that's what Swedes did for me.

They brought me back to life. And then--

Was Silvia in Sweden, too?

Yes, we didn't get separated. And they send me to school. But they send her to work in Gothenburg. But they treated her nice, like any other person. And I was in school.

And then, they asked us if we have anybody out of Europe. And I remember that my sister went to America in '38.

In '38.

And I told them her name was Lebowitz, Frances Lebowitz. And we're from Czechoslovakia. And they put us in the

papers.

The papers in New York?

In Brooklyn. I used to call it "Brookleen."

"Brookleen," and they were looking for "Brookleen."

They were looking for a "Brookleen." And I don't know whether it was her friend that found us, or she found us, and they called the Red Cross in Sweden. And they said, yeah, there are two kids from Czechoslovakia. But they were very sick. And that's why they're in Sweden.

And four months later, they tried to bring the families together. Four months later, we got the visas, and we went-- we came here.

To your sister.

To my sister.

And I think you told me that if your sister hadn't been in the United States, you might have stayed in Sweden.

Yes, I love the Swedes. They were really-- they were really one of the nicest people. Especially after being treated like I was.

Helen, why don't we, if you don't mind, let's turn to our audience and see if they have some questions they would like to ask you. And then, if they're a little reticent to do that-- and I hope you're not-- then I have tons. But at any rate, I'd like to see if anybody would like to ask a question.

If you do, please make it brief. And I will repeat it before Helen answers your question. So yes, ma'am, right here.

Did you find any other members of your family?

The question, Helen, is did you find any other members of your family after the war?

No.

No.

Yes, ma'am, back there.

[INAUDIBLE] experiences that we have as an adult, how did this affect you?

Question is, how did what you experience affect you as an adult? And you might, if you don't mind, Helen, you might talk about what you said to us earlier about how long it took for you to even talk about it.

There was a lot of crying. You got to imagine that if one of your grandmothers died, you mourn. But if they take everybody away from you that you ever knew and loved, you know, your heart is so broken in 1,000 pieces that you don't put it together so fast.

But how I got back to life, is that what the lady wanted to know?

How it affected you through the rest of your life. And you were telling us that you were so worried about what it would do when you had kids, would you mind saying a little bit about that?

Yeah, well after a while, I was here, and of course I worked. And then, I met my husband and we got married. And I had children.

And after my first child was born, I had a long talk with my husband, and I was so afraid I'm going to raise some monsters. And I definitely didn't want them to be-- I wanted them to be good people. So my husband, he suggested, he says, you know, you cannot go on living with your past. You have to put in an iron box and lock it, and just don't talk about it.

And that's what I did. We didn't talk about it. I didn't talk about it, but I cried a lot.

As a matter of fact, not long ago, my daughter told me, she says, mom, every time I was going home from school, I was only hoping you're not crying. But I didn't tell-- I was telling her that I had a headache. And somehow, I don't know, I had too many headaches.

[LAUGHTER]

Got a question back there, yes, sir.

How did your parents explain to you what was going on?

How did your parents explain to you what was going on during the time when first the Hungarians occupied, then the Germans, before you were sent to Auschwitz? Do you remember?

Well, my parents were very protective. They didn't tell us something terrible will happen. Well, they didn't know, either, because we didn't have no papers, we didn't have no radios. We had to buy whatever the Germans were selling.

You know, there are so many people say, well, you know, the Germans didn't know. But there were laws against the Jews that went on, and went on, and went on. They didn't say, we're going to take the Jews and gas them, but there were laws passed against Jews.

Of course.

But my parents were very protective. They kept on telling me, it's OK, the war will be over. We have difficulties, but it's going to be OK.

OK. I think we've got time for another question, if somebody has one? Yes, sir?

This might be a little hard to answer, and this is just, as we look at our own country and the world, and the attitudes, and I know why this place was put up, but do you think there's any way that what you have experienced could happen here in the United States?

Question-- question is, do you--

Could it happen? Could it happen?

Yes.

I really think it could. I think the big-- oh, my God-- not having a good day.

I think it could if we don't speak up. The big problem was that people around the world didn't say anything. I don't know how many of you know that the first gas chamber was built for the German children that were born--

Disabled.

Disabled. Well, but I understand that people who are-- people did talk about it, but the Germans did it anyway. And I really think that the world knew, except the victims didn't know. And nobody spoke up. No country said anything.

So Hitler felt that he could do whatever he wants. So if we're going to see haters still around, they hate you for nothing, they hate me for nothing. They hated my little brother for nothing. All he wanted to do is read his books.

We could have it here. But whenever we see hate, we need to speak up.

When Helen was telling us earlier, before we came up here, about what she felt when she had her own kids, that what was most important was that they feel no hate.

Exactly, exactly.

From all accounts, you've done an extraordinary job of having raised wonderful, wonderful children that are just very good human beings.

Thank you. Thank you.

Helen, before we close up, I'd like you to just tell us how you met Abe. That was a--

Oh, my God.

[LAUGHTER]

How did I meet him? Oh, yeah--

[LAUGHTER]

But we were here already a few months, but we were very depressed and we didn't go anywhere. So my sister says, why don't you go to New York? You'll see New York. So my sister had two friends there-- I didn't have any friends.

So she says, you want to go to New York? Oh, yeah, we went to New York. And all of a sudden, we hear, as we were walking in New York, we hear music. And so we were peeking in, and kids were having a good time. The music was playing, they were dancing. And you know, and these girls that came with me, I'm telling you, they were nice looking girls because the boys came and asked them to dance.

And then, I was stuck with two kids from Hungarian parents, and Hungarians teach their children Hungarian. So they would say a word and they would laugh. And I looked at them, what is there to laugh about? I gave them dirty looks-- finally, they left me.

[LAUGHTER]

I couldn't understand why they were laughing. I feel like crying and they're laughing. So anyway, I'm standing there, and my husband comes-- I mean this guy comes over, and he says to me, you want to dance? I says, oh, I don't dance. Then he says, come on, I'll buy you a drink.

I says, I don't drink. And I was so annoyed with him.

[LAUGHTER]

And he's standing there, and he sees that I'm kind of strange bird here. What did she come here-- he says, so why are you standing? I says, I'm waiting for my friends. I had my sister and two friends. So he says, I'm going to take you home.

I says, no. Because my sister says, don't go in a car and be home before 12:00-- before 11:00. So finally these kids, these girls came, and he says to them, I'm taking you all home. He had a car. So I said to myself, you know, and they says, yeah, they'll go for the ride.

So here my sister looked at each other and said, but you know, Frances told us not to go in a car. Well, we took a chance, and we went in the car. He took us to Brooklyn.

And he went and dropped off these girls, and he dropped me and my sister off the last. But in the meantime, I got so late. And so we ran upstairs and we says, should we tell Frances that we came with a car? So we says, we have to tell her the truth.

But she was so upset, she was so upset. I begged you not to go in a car, I begged you to be home. She was very upset.

Then, I heard him say he'll see me tomorrow. But I wasn't paying any attention. I was so glad to walk out, to go upstairs. Because my sister was worrying.

Next day-- my sister was poor, and she had one bedroom, and she had two children and husband and us two. And so when it came Sunday, we were helping her clean up, and I was on the kitchen floor, you know, washing the floor. And the bell rang-- she didn't have a telephone.

So Frances says to me, would you go down and answer the phone? I says, yeah, sure. So I ran downstairs with dirty feet, and I pass him. He says, where are you running? I said, I'm getting the telephone. He says, I rang the bell.

I says, how? He watched me ring the bell. And he came next door because he was going to Richmond-- he lived in Richmond. So that's how I met him.

And he kept on coming back from Richmond.

[LAUGHTER]

He was a very smart fellow.

I don't know.

Helen, I want to thank you for sharing with us what is unimaginable to all of us, and I know this was exceptionally difficult for you. But it was brave of you. So thank you for doing that.

And thank you all for being with us today. And that we hope you'll come back to another First Person program. We'll do four Wednesdays in August until August 26, and that'll conclude First Person for this year. But if you're in Washington DC next year, look for First Person and try to come here on a Wednesday or Tuesday next year.

We'll have another First Person program tomorrow, that's Wednesday, July 29, when our First Person will be Mrs. Livia Shacter, who is from Czechoslovakia, also. Mrs. Shacter lived under Hungarian occupation, just as Helen did, until 1944, when Germany invaded Czechoslovakia and life became obviously far, far worse.

The Nazis took Livia and her family in a boxcar to Auschwitz. She survived and came to the United States in 1947, as well.

Please remember that you can access First Person excerpts as podcasts on the museum's website. You can also get them through iTunes. And Helen's will be up on the website in the coming weeks.

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

I can only tell you one thing-- the suffering that my family and the Jews and non-Jews-- 20 million Russians suffered from this, but the Russians had a war. But I think hate brought it on, because my little brother didn't harm anybody. I didn't harm anybody.

It's hate. I just want to say this-- when we were walking to work, kids, the German children, they will have a picket fence, and they were screaming to us verfluchte Jude. They didn't know me. They didn't know these kids, that hate is being taught.

Kids are not born hating. They were taught verfluchte Jude. They didn't think that I was a child with needs like they did. They only knew how to hate me. And so I please beg of you, if we can just conquer this hate, that we might have a better world.

[APPLAUSE]