

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

We are in our 11th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Erika Eckstut, whom we shall meet shortly. This 2010 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 guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. With few exceptions, we will have a First Person program each Wednesday through August 25. From April through July, we also have First Person programs on Tuesdays.

The museum's website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests. Excerpts from First Person programs are available on the museum's website as podcasts. They are also available through iTunes. Erika's podcast from 2009 is currently available on the website, and it will be updated shortly with today's program.

Erika Eckstut will share with us her first person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Erika a few questions. We ask that you stay in your seats throughout our one hour program. That way we minimize any disruptions for Erika as she speaks. For those of you who may have passes to the permanent exhibition this afternoon, please note that they are good for the time marked on your ticket and for any time after that.

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

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Erika is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Erika Eckstut was born June 12, 1928, the second daughter of Dolly and Ephram Neuman. Here we see Dolly and Ephram with their daughters Erika and Beatrice in this photo taken sometime between 1933 and 1934. Erika was born in Znojmo, Czechoslovakia. This first arrow points to Czechoslovakia. In 1931, Erika, her sister, and parents moved to the province of Bukovina, the home of Erika's paternal grandparents.

I have just lost the images on my screen, so I'm banking on you being able to see them over my shoulder here. Our second arrow points to Romania. Erika's father Ephram poses here with the students of the Stanesti Hebrew School, which he founded. Erika, Beatrice, and Ephram are in this photograph.

Erika also attended public school. And you can see Erika with a circle around her. Two girls above her is her sister Beatrice. And then, immediately above Beatrice, is her father Ephram. Here we have a group portrait of the Neuman family in a garden. Seated from the left to right are Feige, Pesha Neuman, Erika's mother, and Abraham Neuman, her father. Standing from left to right are Max Neuman, Dolly Geller Neuman, and Ephram Neuman.

In 1940, the Soviet Union occupied the province of Bukovina, including the town of Stanesti. A year later when Romania joined Nazi Germany, the Soviets were driven from Stanesti. In the fall of 1941, the Neumans were forced to settle in the Czernowitz ghetto, where the living conditions were poor and the Jews were subject to deportation to Transnistria.

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

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

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

Today, Erika lives here in the Washington, DC, area with her husband Donnie. And I don't think Donnie's come into the room quite yet. But hopefully if he does, I can identify him for you. Although Erika was not able to resume her medical studies that she had begun in Prague, Czechoslovakia after the war, she started a career here as a medical technician once she arrived in the US. Erika has a son and a daughter, six grandchildren, and five great grandchildren.

Erika volunteers here at the museum's donor desk and membership desk, where you will find her on Fridays. Erika has also contributed to the museum's publication, Echoes of Memory, which features writings by survivors who participate in the museum's writing class for survivors. And after today's program, Erika will be available to sign copies of Echoes of Memory, which are also available in the museum's bookstore. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Erika Eckstut.

[APPLAUSE]

[WHISPERING] I'll just slide it in.

[MICROPHONE CLICKING]

OK. Thanks.

Do you want me to get some water for you?

No.

OK, you'll be all right. OK. OK. As you will see, she's a very independent person, refused all assistance coming up the stairs.

That's right.

We'll gain some more insights later. Erika, thank you for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person today. We have so much to cover in such a short period. So we should get started, I think.

You were born in a small town in Czechoslovakia and then your family moved to Romania when you were young. In 1940, Romania was occupied by the Russians. But in 1941, the Germans occupied your community. And that, of course, forever changed your life and your family's life and your community's. Before we turn to those terrible years under the Nazis, let's start with you telling us a little bit about you and your family and your community in the years before the Germans came.

Before the Germans came, when my father wanted to go to Romania, the reason he wanted to go, he wanted to take the whole family to Palestine. Because he saw that Hitler is coming to power. And he knew it won't be good for the Jews.

So at that time when we left, I was three years old. And unfortunately, I was never a big brain. I don't remember when I was three years old, almost nothing.

But I heard my mother and my father talk about it, how we took the train, and we went there. I think it was a train. We didn't go by car.

And when we came there, I was very happy because I met my grandparents. I had other grandparents, but they were

already at that time very old, quite old. And then I never saw them again.

And those grandparents, my grandfather had such a good sense of humor. And he was so nice. And he taught me a lot of things which my father didn't agree with.

[LAUGHTER]

And then I had to sit for a whole hour. And my father would give me a long lecture. And at the end, he would always say you cannot take the law in your own hands.

In your own home?

No, no, my grandfather said, when I started to go to school, if somebody hits you once. You don't give him back twice, but three times.

[LAUGHTER]

So he will never, ever come to you again. So my father didn't agree with that at all. So it was really not very good.

But I wanted really to be-- I don't know how, because I was not a great student-- my sister was wonderful. She only wanted to read. I wasn't so interested in reading. I was interested in my grandfather.

And since he was a farmer, so he had a cow, a horse, and chickens. And I liked to be with him because I learned a lot from him. My father didn't agree, but I thought it was very good.

So I liked to be with him. And whenever I could, I would always ask the girl to take us to my grandfather. And I would tell him when I grow up, I'll be a doctor. I'll take good care of you.

And I asked him, do you need anybody for your animals? He said, no, I don't need it. When the cow has a little cow, I take care of it.

I don't need no help. He didn't need no help from anybody. I don't need no help from anybody, either.

That's for sure.

Even so, I can't walk well. I can't stand well. But I don't take no help from anybody.

Erika, tell us a little bit about your father. He was a wounded veteran of the First World War, wasn't he?

Yes, he was wounded very badly. And he walked with a cane. And I must admit I loved my family like-- I don't think if anybody could have loved them more than I did. And whenever my father was talking to me, I sat there like a statue and I didn't move. And I never sat like a statue. I always moved around.

But when my father talked, he was such a nice, nice person. And later on when he was the one who was beaten, and he talked to me when he asked me why I don't speak German to my mother, I said because I hate the Germans. And he said, if you don't stop right now to hate, nobody will ever want you as a friend or anything else. But I didn't take it very well.

So my father talked to me for three weeks. And all he wanted, I should be a normal human being. And he was right. Because the only one I really hurt with that was myself. Whatever I didn't like, I hated. And I hated a lot of things.

But once I promised my father I will never, ever hate again. He really got to me so that I can't even explain it. And unfortunately, my father died very early, when everything was done, and in 1948, Czechoslovakia was taken over by the Russians. And it was really not very good for us. But my father passed away when he was 56, which was very, very sad.

And we'll talk more about your father, a little bit later. In fact, Erika describes herself as having been a wild duck in those days. And I think we've already had insights into that.

Yeah, I did.

One of the things that you remember about your father is that he would make you read. But he would make you read a book, but for a purpose. Yeah, that was a very sad story when I saw the principal of the school coming to my father's office. And I told the girl who took care of us, I said, I'm going to my Aunt Tina. She says be home in time for dinner. I said, I will.

And I came home on time for dinner. And my father, after dinner, said could you bring your book? I said, we don't have a book for the second grade. We still have the old book.

He said bring the old book. And I brought it. And he opened it. He said read. And I read beautiful.

I had a memory, only at that time, there was no-- any battery in it. So I couldn't read very well. So my father gave me once and twice to read it. And he said to my mother, he doesn't know what they were talking. She reads beautiful.

And then he closed it, opened, and from the first grade on top was a picture. And that's all I needed. I really could read everything which was written. I remembered it all.

And you said because you had a photographic memory. But once he covered it up, you weren't able to read it?

No, because I didn't see the picture. And I couldn't read it. So then he took a man and he taught me how to read. And I love to read now. I learned how to read.

Erika, before we move to the events that would come later, you had family members in the United States at that time, didn't you?

Yes, my father was from five brothers. One brother fell in the First World War. Three brothers went to America. And my father was the only one left in Europe.

And he was really learning to be a rabbi. But he loved so much the law that the rabbi told him why don't you go? And he said my father would be very upset and he wouldn't help me. And he said he will help you. And he doesn't, I will.

And so my father went and became a lawyer. And the Hebrew school, when he started, was with friends. He couldn't have done it himself. But he and his friend started the Hebrew school. He was a wonderful man.

And he had hoped the reason you would have moved originally was as a stop to get to Palestine.

Absolutely.

Why didn't you get there?

Because when we came to Stanesti, my father told my grandfather what he had in mind. And my grandfather said that's the best idea you ever had. And when my grandfather said but you know, I'll need somebody to take my horse, my cow, and the chickens. My father said I could never get anybody who would take a horse, cow, and chicken.

He said I can't leave them. They are animals. They are alive. I can't leave them alone. He said then we can't go.

And so we couldn't go. And we got a place to live. And I forgot really Romanian, but there were two words that my father was. But he was almost like the whole thing was for the whole town.

He was almost like the mayor?

Mayor, yeah, like a mayor.

So in a sense, you really became such a part of the community--

Yes.

--you didn't leave.

Yeah. And I never really heard anybody call me a Jew, a good Jew or a bad Jew or anything. They invited me always in to have a cookie. And somehow I always was ready for a cookie.

[LAUGHTER]

So I went inside.

Erika, but once in 1941, once the Germans came, then of course everything changed dramatically, immediately. Tell us what happened when they first arrived and what you remember about that.

That was really I think why I can't forget nothing else. When the Russians came, it was hard for us. Because Russian and Romanian has nothing in common, like Czech and Russian had something in common, but not Romanian. And I knew Romanian very well. I mean, I was young and I learned it very well.

But then when it came, when they left, the Russians, maybe a day later, there came about three men to our house. And they said you are coming with me. And my father wanted to know where we are going.

And the men were not nice to my father. And they said you will see. And they took us to a park where I remember I used to go there and play.

Was this your whole family?

My whole family, my grandparents, everybody. And when we came there, in Stanesti were about 500 Jews. They were all there. And, like, in the middle, it was not exactly a middle, stood our rabbi and his two sons.

And without telling us anything at all, they killed the rabbi. And they killed his two sons. And at that, the adults were saying the Kaddish. And the kids were crying like there was no tomorrow.

And I was also one who cried. And I felt, if I will ask my father, my father will have an answer for me. But unfortunately, he didn't when I asked him, am I going to die, too?

And he said, please stop crying. How could I stop crying? Because after they killed the rabbi and his two sons, they took one man after another.

And at the end, they took one which was my uncle and they shot him once, but they didn't kill him. So they killed him by hand. That was the most terrible night I ever had. Was very, very bad.

And how did you manage to not be killed along with the others?

That is my mother, that-- I mean, my father, that he wasn't taken. Because you see, my father knew most of the men who were doing it. But they were also men, because they were Germans there, they were Romanians there, they were Ukraine people there. And the Ukraine people were the ones who did all the killing there. And my father knew a lot of them, but not all of them.

And when they killed my uncle, they told us that we are going to go to the courthouse, which was a big place. And in the morning, we'll come back there. And that's what we did.

But when we came there, my father didn't walk in. He stood at the door and smoked. He was a terrible smoker.

And when he stood there, a man came over and said I will take you home. He said I'm not going go anywhere. He said I'll take your parents, too. So my father said I'll go.

And when we came home, the house was not the same. In my father's room there were a lot of books, some in leather bound and all. And it was down, torn, it was terrible.

And I remember my grandmother and myself, we started to cry like there was no tomorrow. And I think I fell asleep crying. And when I woke up, I heard a voice I have never heard before.

And my sister wanted to go with my father. Two men came for my father.

Again?

Again, that was already in the morning. And my sister wanted to go with my father. And they didn't want to take her. It was a long thing. Then finally, they took her and they left.

And when they left, when they were almost where we have been last night, my father saw-- he couldn't remember the name-- a man in a gray suit. And he said to the man who took him there, he said, this man doesn't belong here. He's going home. And so he came home.

And maybe half an hour, or I don't really know exactly the time, came the chief of police who was the chief of police when the Romanians were there. And he told my father that he will take us to Czernowitz, which was the capital of Bukovina. And when it got a little darker outside, that's what he did.

He took us. And he left us in a wooden area, you know, I forgot what you call that wooden area. I have it written down. But I didn't take out my little piece of paper.

Why do you think that the police chief gave you the warning to move to another city? And why do you think the man in the gray suit--

Most of the people were killed. Most of the people were killed. I mean, he knew that they are not going to stop until everybody is killed. Because when the war was over, from all the people in the Hebrew school, I only knew one. I mean, I knew one girl, my sister's friend, who was alive. She still lives in France.

From that picture we saw, the only one you know that survived--

Yes. I never saw anybody else.

So because you got the warning, you were able to essentially escape.

We really did escape. We really did escape. It wasn't easy.

Because when we came to that, what I said, there were a lot of woods there. So the policeman said you don't need me now. You have only about four, five kilometers. Of course, it was hard for my father and my grandmother to walk, not for the rest of us.

Now I couldn't have done it. Now I am a cripple myself. But at that time, it was no problem.

But it wouldn't be long before you would end up being forced into a ghetto.

No, no, not long at all. Maybe a week later, we were in a ghetto.

Tell us about the ghetto.

To talk about the ghetto, I really don't have the right words. I mean, I know English. And I tried it on the kids I talk to. I tried them, if I speak well enough. They said perfect.

But I don't have words to describe how bad it was. If I say it's bad, what was it? Nothing.

But it was worse than bad. You didn't get anything to eat. In the morning from 7:00 to 8:00 or 9:00, I don't remember exactly, the adults could go out and get some food. And when they got something, I mean, what they got was maybe a little piece of bread like that, which was on one tooth, was nothing. It was really very bad.

And then my father had a very good idea that we should learn something because there were signs outside. If you help a Jew, you and your family will be killed. Jewish kids cannot learn anything.

So my father said how can you let Jewish kids live, not learn something? So we could talk to them and they can ask us questions. And we will see from the question that they understood what we were talking about. And so we had to sit there and listen.

But I didn't pay attention to what they were talking. My father taught us, too. He told us the French Revolution.

So he's trying to keep your education going--

Yes, absolutely.

--in the ghetto?

Always. Education was everything which mattered.

Right.

So he asked me about two, three times. And I never had an answer. And once he said to me do you listen what I'm saying? I said no.

[LAUGHTER]

He said you know, my father didn't like when you lie. I mean, he really didn't. If you lied, you were the worst person.

So he said don't you think that-- I said, I'm very hungry, and I'm dreaming of a piece of bread. He said don't you think that all the kids are hungry? I said maybe not as much as I am. And I didn't have any question because I really didn't listen.

And in fact, your not listening, you ended up sneaking out of the ghetto.

Yeah.

Tell us about that.

We had the idea you saw with the star. The star we had to wear on the coat. And I showed you. I have it there.

But that time I took the ID and I took the star and I left it there. I slept on the floor. And I walked out.

I was blonde. I have blue eyes. They are still blue, you know?

They are still blue.

I looked like Hitler wanted the kids to look. And to be honest with you, when I was 12, what could happen to me? I never thought anything will happen to me. And it really didn't. I walked out.

But I knew that my father has a friend, by accident. I didn't have any friends in the ghetto. My sister had friends. But I did very badly with my sister.

So I came to my mother and I would listen what they are talking. And there I heard that my mother said that my father has a friend from childhood. And he became a priest, but he would never, ever ask him anything.

So when I walked out, I was looking for a place where they sold for nuns and priests. And I found this store. And I bought one.

So it was a store for nuns and priests to buy?

Yeah.

OK.

And I went there. I had, of course, the name, because my mother told them the whole story. And I listened very carefully. And when I bought whatever I did, when it came to pay, I didn't have a penny. I said Father so-and-so is going to pay for it. And I gave his friend's name.

[LAUGHTER]

Which of course, I forgot by now. But I remembered it then very well. When I came home, my mother fainted, which I couldn't understand why she is fainting. But my father took me aside. And he said, how did you pay?

I said I didn't have any money. He said, how did you pay? And I said I didn't pay. I gave your friend's name.

He said you gave my-- who told you I have a friend? I said nobody told me. I just heard it by accident. And I didn't want to say that I heard it from Mother, so I didn't.

And he said, you will have to go to the priest and tell him what you did. Because you see, outside, there was the signs. If you help a Jew, you and your family will be killed. I said I will go.

And next day I took off and I went there. And to be honest with you, I couldn't believe he was a priest. He was so nice.

[LAUGHTER]

And when I told him-- he really was a nice man. And when I told him what I did, he said you can do it as much as you want. But you have to promise me that you won't tell anybody what you do, how you do it. You can't say to nobody.

I said my father knows. He says don't worry about your father. Just promise that you won't say it. And you can do it for a year, for two, whatever you want.

And so I went home. And in the meantime, I went. Every week I went out and I brought food.

But you see, my mother never gave the food to adults, only to children. And it wasn't a lot more, but we got a little more than we got before. And then once, I did it almost already a year, when I walked out, I saw a soldier on crutches. He stood on one crutch and with the other he was beating a man on the ground.

And the man was bleeding. And I said how can you beat the man? He's not doing nothing to you. He said that's not a man, that's a Jew.

I said who cares what it is? But he's not doing nothing to you. You cannot take the law in your own hand. What my father told me, I told him.

And at that moment a policeman said OK, little girl. That will be enough. Let's go home.

In the ghetto, if you were older than four, you knew, everybody knew. If you did anything wrong, you and your family will be killed. And for good measure, you never can tell if they took 5 more or 10 more, didn't matter.

And it was a terrible thing for me to go. But I did know that the people who were not Jewish lived in their own home. And there was not far from the ghetto.

So let me stop you just for a second. So you were basically challenging this German soldier. And a policeman grabbed you and said I'm going to take you home, little girl.

Yeah. And I went to the house.

So you weren't going to take him into the ghetto.

Oh, no. That would be crazy. I wouldn't do that.

OK.

I went to the lady who was a opera singer. I didn't know what she was. But when she was doing with the keys--

But let me stop you again. But you knew a famous person lived in this house?

Yes.

So you said that's my house. OK. OK.

That's my house. I didn't say that's my house.

You just went there. OK.

I just went there. And when she was doing with the keys, I said Mamma, and she opened the door. And the policeman said is that your daughter, Madame. And she didn't say anything to him.

But with a finger to me, she said I told you once, I told you twice, home and homework. And she repeated it. And then he keeps asking is that your daughter, Madame?

She just repeated it. Then she started to hit me right and left. And you know, her hand was like a hammer.

[LAUGHTER]

Really. It was so bad that I felt my head is going to fall down anyway. What the big deal? It didn't matter anymore what happened.

And then I saw that I heard the policeman very quietly, that he said stop hitting her. Take her in. Stop hitting her. And very slowly, she took me in. And she did save my life. And she was a very nice person.

But I thought she'll tell me you can come and stay here with me. But she didn't. She wasn't that very good. She saved my life. She was really a nice lady.

And after that, at some point, you would find yourselves all being gathered and taken to a stadium.

Yeah, then came our time. They took people constantly away and they never came back. And then came our place to go to the concentration camp. And when we went, they told my mother you put this here, this there.

And my father thought he saw somebody. And he waved. As soon as he waved, a soldier knocked him down and started to hit him. Before he started, I was on top of him.

And my father walked with a cane now. The cane, I don't do very well with. But my other thing is not very good. So I had to take the cane. And when I was beaten, I don't remember any more anything what happened after.

But when I wanted to talk, I couldn't talk at all. Something was bothering me. And when I looked up, I thought I'm in the ghetto. And I said how can I be in the ghetto when I just was to go away?

And my mother's tongue came out. And she said Father is all right. And you'll be all right, too.

But you know we have here a doctor. He doesn't have no medication. He put something in your mouth you shouldn't scream. And he will put your right lung where it belongs. And whatever he did, I don't think it was very bad. And my right lung was where it belonged.

And then my father turned to my mother and asked her if she would go to the priest and ask him if he would give her two papers for the children. My father would have never, ever asked for himself or for my mother. My mother wouldn't go nowhere without my father.

But he knew that my mother knew that he would never. See in Europe, only the Jew were circumcised. And when they had any doubt, they took your pants down and they were knew right away who you were.

So my mother went to the priest. And he said if you would have brought the girls, I would have made them Greek Orthodox. But since you didn't, and my mother said the papers do not have to be legal. So he gave my mother two papers and gave her a cross, two crosses. And he said when they go, and they will see a cathedral or a church, they will have to cross themselves.

And the Greeks do not cross themselves like the rest of the people. Instead from right to left to left to right. I think that's correct. I'm not 100% sure because now I'm an old lady. So I don't remember so well.

But he informed you the right way to do it.

Yes, yes, that's right. And so we left. And we were in Russia.

We had a very bad--

You're, what, 13 years old?

No, I was then already about--

14.

14, 14.

So you and Beatrice, the two of you by yourselves--

Yeah, by ourselves.

--leave for Russia?

How we end up there, I really have no idea. But I remember only that we had a little bundle. We didn't have much.

And she didn't want me to sleep on it. We went by a train. Because she said I will sleep and they will take everything away.

So she slept on it. And guess what? They took everything away from her. And she was a very light sleeper, but she didn't hear nothing.

Was very bad for us in Russia. And we ended up in jail. When we walked through the jail-- we ended up in jail because we spoke German to each other. Because my mother's tongue was German. My mother was from Vienna.

So they thought you were Germans?

Yeah.

Yeah.

And the policeman said you're coming with me. And as we were walking, my sister said you have to tell him the truth and the truth only. I said how can I tell him the truth when I have only the papers and the cross?

She said the truth. Because really we were taught not to lie. And when I came there, I told him I'm really a Jewish girl and all.

And he didn't say nothing, just put me in the cell where my sister was. And my sister told me that she didn't tell me about it, but she has in her shoe a razor blade. And she would like I should cut my wrist and she'll cut hers.

I said I don't want to cut my wrist. I would like to live another day. She says how do you know you'll live another day? I said today they won't do nothing.

And she started to cry. And I told her that she told my mother she'll take care of me. She said I can't. And if you don't do it, I don't want to leave you alone.

And in that, the policeman came down. And he asked me what did you do on Easter? I said nothing. He said didn't you have a holiday?

I said yeah. We had Pesach. He said what did you do on Pesach? I said you had to ask four questions of your father or grandfather, whatever. But I remembered only one question. And I started Ma Nishtana while I was there.

And he said that's all right. Let's go. When he took us out, you know, it was so unheard of that anybody would ever get out of a Russian jail. We didn't have nobody ever-- I mean, he asked me, I told him a lie. I mean, I told him the truth. I didn't tell him the lie.

But it wouldn't have made a difference. He knew that we were not what we said we were. But it was unbelievable when we were outside. And we were really so sad that we didn't know his name, just that he was Jewish.

The policeman was?

Yeah, the policeman was. And then I went to the hospital back. And then I had a friend. And she was about three years older than me. And she took to me.

I went to school. And I went to the hospital. Because I wanted to become a doctor, always was in my mind.

By this time, you and your sister had found a place to live?

Oh, did we find. We were already out of the place we had because they needed it. And we had an old lady with us, which we didn't know her name.

I mean, I remembered once her name and I forgot it now. But I wrote it down somewhere where I wrote the book. So I wrote it down.

But you called her the old lady, too?

We called her the old lady.

You think now she was about 35.

She was 37, I think.

37, yeah.

Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

But you see now I would say she's a young lady.

Right.

But when I was 14, she was an old lady for me. Now everybody who is 30 is very young.

So you were with the three of you, your sister, you, and the old lady were together?

The old lady was together. And the girl told me then that we will have a very good time, that they are going to take that German girl--

And who's telling you this is the girl who worked in the hospital with you?

Yeah.

OK.

The nurse.

The nurse.

And she said they are going to take the old lady, too. Because I never told her it's my sister, my whatever. I never talked about family at all. So I said what's going to happen to you and me? She said we are going have a great time.

I said what are we going to do? We're going to meet some nice boys. At that time I think I was already 15. And I thought if I tell my sister I'm going to stay behind and meet some boys, will I get it. She can't even imagine what I would get if I tell her that.

So I went home and I told them what happened. And the old lady said we have to go. We didn't have nothing to worry about. We had nothing to take with us.

And just so I'm sure, so everybody understands, when this woman Monica, she was your friend in the hospital, she didn't know that your sister was your sister.

No, absolutely not.

And she thought she was a German.

German, yeah.

They were going to turn her in and the old lady, too.

And the old lady, too.

Yeah. And me, she wouldn't have turned in. I was also blonde, but not as blonde as my sister at all, I mean.

So when you went home and told them what was happening--

Then we had to go.

--you had to go.

Yeah. We had to. And that was already-- we had-- about the third place where we slept. And that was next to the nun, to the sister.

Like a convent?

No.

No?

No. I didn't mean sister. I meant she was a nurse.

OK, not a sister, a nurse.

OK.

And she stayed next to us. It was just by accident.

OK. So now you've got to flee?

Yeah, we went. So we went and we came to a forest. And when we were there, a male's voice came on. And he said do you know the-- Donny, your husband is here.

Donny's here.

Donny's here. He knew I didn't take t down, you know.

So you said do you know the password?

Password. And the old lady said we don't know the password. Three women running. And it got very quiet.

And then finally a light came on, a flashlight. On the lady, they put it. And then he put it on himself. And the next thing we knew is that they were kissing. And we were completely shocked. The old lady and--

And the soldier?

--the soldier were kissing. And then she started to tell us that that's her younger son. That she had two sons and a husband. The husband they killed in front of her. And she didn't know where the other son is. And this was her son.

And the son said he's going go to the officers and ask them to take us along. And he came back and he said they can't take us along because these are tanks. You can take only one person. And besides, we don't have clothes. I mean, we did have clothes, but not military clothes.

So then five minutes later, he came and he said he's going to take his mother. And two of the soldiers are going to take us. And then we'll be in Poland. They'll take us out and give us to.

So escape from Russia across the border into Poland?

Yeah.

OK.

I wouldn't go to Poland if you give me now the most wonderful trip and you pay every penny.

[LAUGHTER]

But you did go that time?

I went. And she wanted to give us away. And we ran away, you know. My sister, Polish and Czech wasn't very far from each other. I understood about 70%, I don't know.

And my sister, when they gave us to this Polish lady, she asked her do you have where to put them? She says I have a room upstairs they can go and take their coats off. We didn't take nothing off. We were very cold because that was January 1945 when we came there.

And then my sister came in. And she said she heard her say that she has three Jews here. And they can have them.

So your sister overheard the lady of the house say that?

Yes. So she opened the window. And she said the old lady was very nice. She was trying to fake that she can't run anymore. She will keep them.

And my sister says when I go, you throw it out the window and then you jump. So I asked the lady very nicely. You want to go to the window?

She said no. I said you want that in your mouth? She said no. So I very gently took her to the window and pushed her.

[LAUGHTER]

And my sister held her hand, but she was half her size anyway you look at it. So she just broke her--

Broke her fall?

--fall. And when I went, nobody was holding the hands for me. So I jumped. And nothing happened to me.

And then you took off.

Then we took off. And we came to Snina. Now it's not anymore Czechoslovakia, it's just the Czech Republic and Slovakia is on its own. But this was the first Czech thing we had.

And there were a lot of soldiers there. And they gave us a lot of food. What they gave us, I have no idea. But I know when we were done with it, there wasn't nothing left. We ate every single thing they gave us. There were also soldiers and officers. I don't think they ate, just we ate.

And by this time, Erika, the Germans had been all pushed out of the area. So this was all Russian patrol?

Yeah, there were no soldiers there at all, I mean, except the Czech and--

Russian soldiers.

--the Russian. And after we finished it, they took the lady in the army. And that's when we found out she was about 37. And they would have taken my sister, too, but you had to be 21 to be taken in the army then.

And of course, the war is still going on.

Yeah, the war was going on. So my sister said she doesn't want to get married. And there were officers and soldiers. And we stayed with one of the people there, with one of the farmers.

And he was very nice to us. And there came soldiers and officers. And one officer came there and he saw my sister. And she was really a beautiful girl. And he said he would like to marry her. And he would take me along, too.

And she told him she doesn't want to get married. She doesn't know him. She doesn't love him. And she doesn't know how to cook.

[LAUGHTER]

So he left. He left. And then the army left, too. And the first night, we heard a stone in the window. Somebody threw it in. And when I woke up, my sister gave him-- she had a little chain-- not chain, chain she didn't have, charm. So she gave him the little charm.

I also had a little charm. And I said to her do I have to give it? She said no, you keep it. My daughter has it. Was a little sunshine, nice little sunshine.

But so we then came to another town, which was Humenne. And in Humenne, he gave us to a lady who was a young lady. And she had a baby about 13 months old. And she asked can they wash the window? Can they wash the floor?

He said they can do anything, which I don't know where he got the idea. But that's the way he portrayed us.

Because he was trying to find a place for you?

Yeah. He was very right. I mean, he said it. And then he left.

And the lady said she had soldiers there the night before. And she would like if he could wash the floor. And my sister said yes. She said you take care of the baby. I'll wash the floor.

And she also told us she doesn't have any food, but she will bring some food. And she left. And my sister said you take care of the baby. And I will wash the floor.

So she left a few noodles there. And I cooked them not very well because they were kind of hot. So I put it in my mouth, chewed it, put it in the baby's mouth. And the baby was just as hungry as I am. Because whatever I gave him, he never cried.

And then I heard you German spy, we will show you. I knew that there were Russian people. So I walked out with the baby. And I said she's not Russian. She's Jewish.

And she's married to a Czech officer. Why I right away started with a lie, I have no idea. But I really wanted to make it very official that she's really all right.

And they didn't believe me right away. But then I don't know if they believed me or they didn't believe me. But then finally the Russians had to leave. And they said they will be back.

And the Czech soldier came. Said what is he doing here? And he came to tell me that where we were in Snina that there were 16 Jews. And when they heard that we were all Jews, they came out. And they were all killed. And they wanted to know if we also got killed.

But the man told him where we went and he came for us. And my sister asked him if he knows the officer who wanted to marry her. And he said he's fighting somewhere. He's not with us. So that was the story.

Tell us, in the time that we have left, Erika, tell us how you were able to both of you end up getting married and then reuniting with your parents. Tell us about that.

My sister was looking desperately for that officer who wanted to marry her. And that was in January. And she found him by March. And she got married on March before the 30th or 31st.

Before March 31st, yes?

Yeah, because she didn't want on the first, it should be a joke.

April Fool's Day? OK.

[LAUGHTER]

So she got married. And he took me along. And my husband was the best man when my sister got married. And he was from Moravska Ostrava.

And for us the war was over on May the 9th. So on May the 9th, he went to Moravska Ostrava to see about his mother and his sister and relatives. And he came back. And nobody was alive.

He had one aunt which was alive who married a non-Jew in 1928. And she had two kids. She was not completely all right. It was a lot of problems she had.

And my late husband asked me if I would marry him. And I said yes immediately, not thinking at all. And my sister wanted to know if I know what it is to get married at 16. And I said of course. What she didn't know was that I really didn't want to go to school anymore.

[LAUGHTER]

And I felt that's it. I will be a married lady.

And not have to go to school?

But I was so wrong. Because we were married maybe three days when he said we have to go to school and find out if they could give you some tests so you shouldn't have to go where you left off. I said I don't have to go to school at all.

He said you don't? I said why would I have to go to school? He said because you don't know nothing.

[LAUGHTER]

I said how do you know what I know or what I don't know? He said I know you don't know. And he was the third year in medical school. He said where would you like to go?

I said to medical school. I always wanted to be a doctor. He said I don't know if they have a test, but we will go. And they did have a test.

But they told him they don't think that I will make it. He said I will be the teacher and she will make it. He was a terrible teacher.

[LAUGHTER]

You know, I couldn't learn algebra and a few other things. And boy, did he make me study until I knew it. And I made it. And I ended up in medical school.

In Prague.

In Prague I was a whole year. But then my late husband was very sick and he passed away. My son was 5. My daughter was 12. It was terrible. It was terrible.

Erika, tell us about your reunification with your parents.

That was so joyful and at the same time so sad. That's when we got together, which was, for us, a miracle. They were not where we left them. They were in Bucharest.

At the time of your liberation, for you and Beatrice, did you even know your parents were alive?

No, we didn't know where they are, what happened. Because we left them in the ghetto.

Ghetto, OK.

We didn't know nothing. But then through a brother of his somehow we found out that they are in Bucharest. But Beatrice and I didn't have any papers to get a birth certificate or something. How could we go? We needed a passport.

But at that time, we both had husbands. So we said we'll send both of them. And they went and they brought us our parents. We didn't speak one word of German to my parents. I mean, to my father we didn't have to, but to my mother.

When my father realized that we don't speak German, he wanted to know what's going on, why we don't. My sister was always a wonderful person. And she didn't want to say anything which is not the right way. She didn't say nothing.

I waited a minute or two. She didn't say nothing. I said because I hate the Germans like I never hated anybody. And I don't want to speak German.

My father said that's very nice. So your children will have nothing what to do with what you had to do with the Germans. I said, of course not. And my father started to talk to me. And he talked to me for three weeks.

[LAUGHTER]

And I couldn't understand how my father can tell me that I have to be to everybody very nice. It doesn't matter what religion he is. It doesn't matter what he looks, if he's Black, red, yellow. It doesn't make a difference.

I have to be to every human being very polite and very nice and very everything. I said why would I have to be so nice

and everything. Why? He said because if you want that your children shouldn't have anything to do with it, you have to have the whole world to feel like you.

If you will do what you are doing now and hate, nobody will like you. Nobody would ever accept you. And what my father wanted to do is make from us human beings.

And you know what? My sister understood him immediately. Just me, the hot head, couldn't understand what my father was saying.

He talked his heart out. And then one day I told him, Daddy, I will never, ever, ever hate anybody. It doesn't matter what they are.

But I don't have to love everybody, right?

He said right. You don't have to love everybody. But you cannot hate, either. And I never hated anybody at all. I don't love everybody, but I definitely didn't--

Erika, in the little time we have left, would you tell us about when you saw your father for the first time after the war? I think people would like to hear that.

It's so hard to tell you when I saw my father the first time. I think it's like I saw God. I can't even explain you. It was so good to see him and my mother. My mother was a very, very nice lady and I loved her, too.

In all my life, my mother was once she told me that she knew I'm a tomboy. But she didn't know that I'm a bad one. Because I wasn't really bad, but I think I was maybe a little bit.

So when I saw my father, I saw the whole world. I mean, he taught me everything, really and truly taught me everything. When we had the Hebrew school, we had there always a thing that when the school was over, we had a little show, or you had to learn a poem.

And I had to learn a poem. But my father knew Hebrew very well. And he taught me. And I couldn't go until I learned the poem.

And then when I went to my grandfather, because he asked me that I should come, I came there. And he said, boy, did that take long?

I said it's a very long poem. He said, I will give you some cherries. He did everything himself. And he had sour cherries in his garden. And he made wine out of it. And he would give me the cherries from the wine. And I liked the cherries a lot.

[LAUGHTER]

And he gave me a whole bowl of cherries. And I ate it. And when I came to say the poem, I started the right way. But then I went to the last, then I went to the first, and I said it very good. And I knew it was good because everybody was clapping like there was no tomorrow.

So you know, then before anything could happen, my grandfather said you want to talk? You talk to me. They didn't talk a whole week together. And you know what was the sad part? I never ever got the cherries again.

[LAUGHTER]

We're going to wrap up in just a couple of minutes. We won't have time for question and answers. But when we finish, I'm going to turn back to Erika in just a minute, she's going to go up to the outside, top of the stairs, where she'll be signing copies of Echoes of Memory.

We obviously, in this short period, could only scratch the surface of what Erika could share with us. And what we're not even able to begin to touch is about her post-war life, which included living under the Soviets in Czechoslovakia. And what's one of the amazing things about Erika is she was the first person to be legally allowed to leave the Iron Curtain in 1959, I believe it was.

'60.

'50, 1960, including actually making calls to Khrushchev to try to get into the United States.

Yeah, my mother wrote him a telegram. And he answered.

The saga of her exit from behind the Iron Curtain to the United States is an amazing one. I'd like to thank all of you for being here. I'd like to let you know, again, that we have a First Person program every Wednesday until August 25. We'll also have them on Tuesdays to the end of July. And we hope that you can come back another time and join us.

Our next First Person program will be next Tuesday, June 8, when we will have Mr. Steven Fenves, who was born in Yugoslavia. After living under Hungarian occupation from 1941 until May of 1944, Mr. Fenves' community was occupied by the Germans. His family would then be rounded up along with other Jews in their community and sent to Auschwitz where he would become part of the resistance there. In April 1945, Mr. Fenves was forced on a death march before being liberated by American troops.

Please remember that can access the First Person podcasts on the museum's website as well as through iTunes. It is our tradition at First Person that our first person has the last word. And so with that, I'd like to turn back to Erika to close our program for us.

I want you all to know that I love-- I am with the Speakers Bureau here, and I speak to children, to military, to everything. But I do love to speak to children an awful lot. And I leave every child with the idea not to hate. You can't hate anybody or anything. You don't have to love everybody, but you cannot hate at all.

Because if you hate, nothing is ever going to change. Because the most important thing is to get along with people, to be a human being like anybody else. And never, ever to go down, because you really and truly just kill yourself. It's not that you are doing anybody any good.

If you are going to hate, nobody is going to hate because you hate. But you are going to be so-- I was such a miserable person. It was terrible. Whatever I didn't like, I hate you.

I don't hate anybody. I really don't. And when I speak to children, I leave every children with the same idea. Please don't hate.

I know you are not children. But if there is any child here, should remember, don't you ever hate anybody. It doesn't pay.

It's really good for nothing. It's the worst thing you can do is hate. That's all I would like to tell you.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Thank you very, very much. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. There is my husband. I want--

He's right back, straight back where you can't see him.