

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

We are in our 12th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Erika Eckstut, whom we shall meet shortly. This 2001 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.

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 of our guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. With few exceptions, we will have a First Person program each Tuesday and Wednesday through July, and then on Wednesdays only in August.

The museum's website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests. Excerpts from First Person programs are made available as podcasts on the museum's website. They can also be accessed through iTunes. A podcast featuring Erika is currently available on the website.

Erika Eckstut will share with us her firsthand account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask a few questions of Erika. We ask that you stay in your seats throughout our one-hour program. That way we minimize any disruptions for Erika as she speaks. If you have a cell phone or a similar device, we ask that you turn it off at this time. If you have a pass to the permanent exhibition for today, please note that it is good for the time printed on your ticket or 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. 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, national, or ethnic 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 between 1933 and 1934. Erika was born in Znojmo, Czechoslovakia. The 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. Our second arrow points to Romania. Erika's father, Ephram, poses here in this picture with the students of Stanesti Hebrew school, which he founded. Erika, Beatrice, and Ephram are in this photo. And you can see the circle is on Erika. Erika also attended public school.

Here, we have a group portrait of the Neuman family in a garden. Seated from left to right are Feige Pesie Neuman, her mother, and Abraham Neuman, her father. Standing 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 Cernauti to Erika Neuman, authorizing her to remain in Cernauti, rather than be deported in 1942.

Here, we see Erika reading a magazine in the Cernauti ghetto 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 our slide presentation 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. She eventually emigrated to the United States in 1960.

Today, Erika lives here in the Washington, DC area with her husband Donnie. And Donnie is right here with Erika. Although Erika was not able to resume her medical studies that she began in Prague, Czechoslovakia, after the war, she started a career as a medical technician after arriving in the United States.

Erika has a son and a daughter, 6 grandchildren, and 5 great-grandchildren. Erika volunteers here at the museum at the donor and membership desk where you will find her on Fridays. She speaks frequently about her Holocaust experience and especially enjoys speaking at schools and military installations. Already this week, she has spoken at two local schools, including a local Catholic school, and of course, is with us today.

Erika is also a contributor to the museum's publication, *Echoes of Memory*, which features writings by survivors who participate in the museum's writing class for survivors. After today's program, Erika will be available to sign copies of *Echoes of Memory*, which is also available in the museum bookstore. So when we finish, Erika will step off the stage and go up out the doors up the stairs, and she'll be signing copies of the book there. With that I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Erika Eckstut.

[APPLAUSE]

Are you OK?

Yeah, I'm OK.

Just sit back and be comfortable. And I will do all the work for you.

OK.

Good afternoon.

Erika, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person. We have so much to talk about in one hour. So why don't we start? Let's just get right to it.

That's fine. Let's start.

OK. You were born, as we said, in a small town in Czechoslovakia.

Yes.

But then your family moved to Romania when you were quite young. In 1940, Romania was occupied by the Russians. But then in 1941, the Germans came, and you were just 13 years of age. And then life turned--

12.

12 years.

Don't make me older.

[LAUGHTER]

Before we turn to those terrible years of the war and the Holocaust, let's start first, Erika, with you, 12 years old, tell us

about you, your family, your community, what it was like before the war began.

Before the war began, I had the best life anybody could have. When we came to Romania, to Bukovina, I met my grandparents. And I immediately fell in love with my grandfather. He was such a nice person. And he was so funny. And he always called me Erik because he didn't have a grandson. So he called me Erik.

[LAUGHTER]

And whatever he taught me, my father didn't agree with it. Like he said, when you go to school and somebody gives you a hit, you hit him back twice or three times, whatever you can. My father didn't agree with that. He said that's against the law and gave me a long lecture, which lasted about an hour.

And there was also between my grandmother and my grandfather, when I came, I looked so nice and so neat and clean. And when I left, you wouldn't recognize me. You know, everything was upside down. And my grandmother didn't like that. And my grandfather said, yes, he understands her and winked at me not to worry about it. And it was just a wonderful, wonderful life.

And when I was six, I started to go to Romanian school and to Hebrew school. And in the Hebrew school, always when we finished the school, we had a little poem or a little show we had. And that time, I had to learn a long poem.

And my father who knew very well Hebrew, he was the one who taught me. I mean, he didn't teach me. He had to see what I can do. And it took me a while before I could do anything. But I managed it. And when I knew it really well, I could go back to my grandfather.

When I came there, my grandfather said, where have you been so long? I said, I had to learn a poem. He said, what poem? I said, a Hebrew poem for the school.

So he gave me a little bowl. He always gave me a little bowl with cherries. And I loved the cherries.

So he said, when do you have to do it? And I said, Friday, or Saturday. I can't remember when I had to do it. He said, before you go there, you come to my house and I will give you some cherries.

So before I went to tell my poem into the school, I came to my grandfather. And he gave me a nice little bowl with cherries. They were so good. And I ate them. And then I went to tell my story.

When I started, I said the first last from the last line. Then I started from the beginning. And I did it very well because they clapped like they never heard anybody with such a nice poem like I could tell.

And when I finished I thanked them very much for being there, and I went down. When I came down my father stood there and he said, breathe on me, which I did. And then I didn't hear nothing. I heard my grandfather say, you talk to me. And they didn't talk to each other for a whole week.

And I never, ever got the cherries again which was very sad for me. And then--

Because they had fermented, right?

It was wine.

Yes.

[LAUGHTER]

I didn't know it was wine. But I knew I liked it very much.

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

He was a veteran of the First World War. He was shot a lot. And he had an awful lot of operations on the legs. And he was the most wonderful, kindest man you have ever met, ever. He can give you an answer for anything and everything.

And I remember the only thing I didn't agree with my father was that he always knew everything of course better than I did, which doesn't take much. But he was just a most wonderful, wonderful person. And he was always very, very anxious about it that we have to be nice to everybody. And I knew I have to be nice to everybody. I mean I heard it already for a long time.

But he said, when you are young, you don't know. But if it's a person who is not your religion or you can meet a person who is yellow or Black or whatever, it shouldn't make a difference. You have to be nice to everybody. And I listened to him. And there was nothing to worry about. I mean the war wasn't one yet or something.

And in 1937, the soldiers accused my father of having a gun when he went to the-- I forgot now-- the courthouse, when he went to the courthouse. And when he got accused of it, he took his own-- he didn't look for a lawyer. He took his own case. And he was reinstated because we also got a place to live from the government. And everything was all right. Everything was the same way. And then the Russians came.

Before we talk, a couple more questions for you, Erika.

Yeah.

You described yourself to me as a wild duck.

Yeah.

What did you mean by that?

I wasn't a very nice little girl. [LAUGHTER] I did not listen to my father as much as I listened to my grandfather. And my grandfather, the way he taught me didn't go along with my father. So I had a little problem.

And you had relatives, as I remember--

Yes.

--in the United States.

Yes.

And--

Three brothers of my father were in the United States because my father was really one of five brothers. One brother fell in the First World War. My father was very badly wounded. And the three went to America.

And when I came here, I met all three of them. But I really don't know what happened to them because I don't know them now. And they must have had children. But I don't know where they are.

Erika, you began to tell us, of course, things changed once the Russians came. So--

Yes.

--Russians moved into Bukovina in?

In 1940. And it was very hard for all the kids to learn Russian because Russian had nothing what to do with Romanian. And by the way, I spoke Romanian very well. I forgot it already. But I spoke very well. I was there 10 years.

And when the Russians came, I think every kid was very, very worried about learning Russian. We had to learn to read, to write, and of course, to speak Russian. And I don't know if it was a miracle or whatever, but we all learned how to read, to write, and to speak Russian. And then one day, they left and that was really the worst day of my life.

Before you tell us that, why did the Russians leave?

Because the Romanians decided to go to fight with the Germans.

To be Allied with the Germans.

To be Allied with the Germans and to kill the Jews, you know. And that's when it really started to be very bad for us.

And things changed dramatically--

Changed dramatically.

Immediately.

Immediately.

Tell us what happened at the very beginning.

At the very beginning, maybe two days later, two or three men came to our house and said we have to go with them. My father wanted to know where they will take us. And they said, you will see.

And we went with them. And they took us to a park. I knew the park. I used to go and play there.

And when we came there, it was not a circle, but like in a circle, stood all the Jews there. I really have no idea how many were there. If 500 or 1,000, I don't know how many Jews were there. But they were all there.

And they started with killing the rabbi and his two sons. And then they started to kill men, just men, no women or children, just men. And they killed an awful lot.

And then they took a man who happened to be my uncle. And they shot him once, but they didn't kill him. They killed him by hand. And it was so terrible. I have never ever seen a man being hurt, but not being shot, being killed by hand. It was the worst thing I have ever had.

And then they said that we have to go to the courthouse because there is a lot of room. And in the morning, we are going to come back where we are now. And so we went.

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

Erika, why do you think your father wasn't killed with many others that were killed in the park?

You know, my father got a job when-- he was a lawyer by profession. And he got a job-- you know, it was two words, but I forgot Romanian. And he had a very good position. I mean, everybody knew him. And of course, they knew me too, you know. It wasn't a big town.

And so, you know, I mean when they came to take us, they came to take us, to kill us, not to be nice to us. And when we came back-- when we were there standing, a man came to my father and said, I will take you home. And my father said, I'm not going go anywhere. And he said, I will also take your parents. And my father said, I will go.

When we came home to our house, everything in my father's room, which he had a lot of books, were on the floor, torn. And it was terrible. And my grandmother and I started to cry like there was no tomorrow. And we were crying.

And when we woke up, we heard the voice we never heard before. And finally, we heard them say, OK, tell that-- let's take her. Let's go.

And they and my sister went with them. My sister wanted to go with them. And they didn't want to take her. But she was--

These were men who came to get your dad again?

Yes, they came only to get my father.

Yes.

And when she was so wanted to go, so they said, let's take her. And they left. And when he came almost where we were the day before, there came a man in a gray suit. My father could not remember the name of the man. And he said this man doesn't belong here. He's going home.

So he and my sister came home. And maybe an hour later came who was the chief of police of the town. And he came and he told my father that he's going to take us to Czernowitz. That we'll walk. But he'll take us.

And when it got a little darker outside, he came and we went. And the only ones who was very hard to walk was my grandmother and my father. And then when we came to a place where it was-- I forgot how you say the-- how do you say--

The forest.

What?

The forest.

Yeah, forest. I forgot forest.

Thank you, Donnie.

I know it in German, but I don't know it in English. And so when we came to the forest, he said, now you can rest and then you have only 5 kilometers to go. And as soon as he said it, he left and my father fell. My mother got very upset and ran to get some water. My sister ran with her. My grandparents started to cry.

And I started to beat my father, please talk to me, talk to me. I guess I wanted to give him a massage. Or I don't know what I was doing. And my father all of a sudden made that he's all right. I should stop hitting him. And I did stop. And my father got to be all right. And we made it to Czernowitz.

In Czernowitz, maybe 2, 3 days later, we were in a ghetto. And the ghetto was the worst place you can imagine to be. I really have no words to tell you how bad it was. And we were not in a concentration camp. But we had to go too because the ghetto they usually would take once a week a whole bunch of people. And they would go to Transnistria. That was the ghetto-- not the ghetto, we were in the ghetto. That was--

For deportations.

Yeah, for deportations, they went to. And we went there too. Do you want me to go on with that?

Tell us more about being in the ghetto. Yes.

In the ghetto, there was absolutely no food. I remember very vividly that I was terribly hungry. And I was scared to death. I don't know what I was scared of for death-- like death. Because you see, I was a 12-year-old then, not now. I probably don't know now what the 12-year-olds know now. I don't know yet. They are really smart.

I didn't know nothing. I was only scared and hungry. You didn't get no food. You got in the morning a little piece of bread, which wasn't even enough to do anything for you. And in the evening, whatever you got wasn't worth while talking about.

And outside, there were signs. Jewish kids cannot go to school. If we find a non-Jew helping a Jew, he and his family will be killed. And it was terrible there. There was nothing else-- terrible is really not the worst. I don't have the words to say how bad it was.

And my father had a very good idea, he thought. I didn't think it was a good idea. But he didn't ask me. And he decided that they will talk to the children-- we didn't have no books, no paper, no nothing to write or do with-- that they will talk to us if it's history or geography or math whatever. And we will have to ask a question relating to that subject.

And he said, we have here teachers, professors, students. We have a lot of people who can really teach the children a lot. And so we had to listen. And I was also a student. I was sitting there. I never ever had a question. But my father asked me, once, the second time, the third time. Then he asked me the fourth time.

The fourth time, he said, are you listening? I said, no. He said, what are you doing? I said, I am dreaming of a piece of bread. I liked bread so much, like now, when I see bread, I can't-- I can't leave it. I have to eat it. I really and truly like bread like I can't begin to tell you how much I like it. And it didn't help me that I liked the bread so much.

And when I said that I'm dreaming of a piece of bread, my father looked at me so sad. And he left me. And you see, you saw they showed that we got an ID when we were in the ghetto. And we had the ID, and we had the star, which we had to wear on the coat.

And I took off the star from the coat. And I took my-- and I left it on the floor where I slept. And I walked out. That was against the law. You couldn't walk out of the ghetto.

I walked out. And what I heard was my mother-- you see, in the ghetto I didn't have any friends because when we left Stanesti where we were, they did the killings the next day. So I didn't have any friends. I heard that they were in Israel. And when I went to Israel, I couldn't find anybody.

We found one girl who was married to another guy when my husband was there on business. And we found one girl. But I mean, I really didn't have any friends.

But I heard my mother talk that my father had a friend way back when from his youth. And he was a Greek Orthodox priest. So I was looking for a place where they were selling for priests and nuns. And I found a place--

Selling food for priests and nuns?

Food, yeah. And I went there, and I bought as many breads as I could carry. And whatever else I bought I can't remember. When I came home, my mother--

Did you have money to pay for it?

I didn't have a penny.

No. So what happened?

And my father knew that I didn't have any money. And he asked me, how did you pay? And you see to lie to my father I would bring mother in such troubles I didn't want to lie. So I said I heard that you have a friend, and he is a priest. And I knew his name. So I gave his name, and they took it.

And my father said, where did you hear it? I said, I can't remember. And I couldn't remember no matter what he said. He said, now you will have to go back to the priest and tell him what you did because you just made it sure that they will take him and kill him and his family too.

I didn't like the idea to go to the priest. But I couldn't do nothing with my father. So I went--

Back out of the ghetto to go to the Priest.

Oh, out of the ghetto. But you know, I was 12. It never even dawned on me that something could happen to me. All they had to do is just stop me. I didn't have my ID.

But, you see, my hair was blonde. Now it's so blonde it can't get any better. So that's all it got. It won't get any-- so I looked more like a German girl than a Jewish girl. So it wasn't really very bad. You know, nobody stopped me. But that's what they used to tell me, that my eyes and my hair did it.

And I went to the priest. And I told him what I did. And he says, don't worry. Do it as much as you want. I said, my father knows. He says, don't worry about your father. Just promise me that you won't tell anybody what you're doing or how you are doing it.

And I couldn't believe the priest is so nice to me. And my father, you know, when he told me to go to the priest I thought it's a bad thing. But not bad at all. And I did it maybe a whole year.

Going out and bringing food back in--

Going out and bringing food and giving the name of him, no problem. And then once when I walked out, I--