

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 12th year of the First Person program. Our "first person" today is Mrs. Helen Goldkind, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2011 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. I'm pleased to let you know that Mr. Louis Smith is with us today.

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 guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. We will have a program each Wednesday through August 31. We will then resume our First Person program in March 2012.

The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our First Person guests. Excerpts from each First Person program are available as podcasts, including one for Helen, on the museum's website. They are also available through iTunes.

The museum is delighted that you have joined us today for First Person. And we hope that you will stay in touch with us and the program. After your visit today, the card received today when you entered the theater provides you with information about how you can stay connected with the museum in a variety of ways. Please, check out the museum's page to learn and hear more from survivors, including the link to the First Person podcast series, as well as through other podcast programs and other information about our survivors.

Helen 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, at the latter end of the program, we may have an opportunity for you to ask Helen a few questions.

We ask that you stay in your seats throughout our one-hour program. That way, we minimize any disruptions for Helen as she speaks. If you have a cell phone or a similar device, we ask that you turn that off. I'd like to let those of you who may have passes to the permanent exhibition today know that they are good for the time printed on your ticket or for any time after that today.

The Holocaust was a state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims-- 6 million were murdered. Roma and Sinti, or Gypsies, people with mental and physical disabilities, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including 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 Helen is one individual's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction. And 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 rounded up Jews, sending them to the Uzhgorod ghetto. The arrow on this map of Czechoslovakia points to Uzhgorod. Helen's family was deported to Auschwitz. The arrow on this map of major Nazi camps shows the location of Auschwitz.

She 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. Here, we see a photo of liberated survivors of Bergen-Belsen. Helen emigrated to the United States in 1946. We close with a photo of Helen at her wedding to Abe Goldkind in 1947.

Helen came to the United States in 1946. She married her husband, Abe, as we mentioned, in 1947. They would move from Richmond, Virginia to Baltimore soon after their marriage.

Helen and Abe had three children. One daughter is a microbiologist, who is now retired as a civilian employee of the US Army. Their other daughter is a psychologist. Their son is a gastroenterologist. And he is also a civilian employee, currently with the US 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'd be close to her children and grandchildren. Helen has eight grandchildren, ranging in age from 16 to 37. And she has eight great-grandchildren, with the newest granddaughter being just over a year old. And I'm pleased to let you know that Helen's daughter, Michelle, and Helen's grandson, Darren, are here with us today. So Michelle and Darren, if you wouldn't mind just raising your hand or letting people know you're here.

[APPLAUSE]

Helen volunteers at the museum at the membership and donors 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]

OK.

Helen, welcome, and thank you so much for being willing to be our first person today. Thank you.

You're welcome.

And I know we have just so much to cover in a short time. So let's get started. And I'd like to start, Helen, by asking you about your early years, when Czechoslovakia was partitioned and then occupied by Hungary. You were living in your hometown of Volosyanka. Your family had lived there for several generations. Tell us what your early life was like and what your family's life was like living there in Volosyanka before the Hungarian occupation, really the pre-war years.

Well, my life was terrific because I had my family around me. And my mother had six brothers. And then there were cousins. So my life under the Czechs was extremely good. Yeah.

A pretty happy time, wasn't it, for you guys?

Very happy, very happy, but short-lived.

Right. Before we turn to that time, tell us a little bit about your father and your mother. Tell us about your parents.

Well, my parents were wonderful parents. They worked very hard.

Martin and Rose, right?

Right. Right. And well, there was a unity of family. The family meant a lot. And my parents were very good. And the children were OK. And we tried. And the only thing that I would say, they worked very, very hard. But there wasn't anything terrible going on by the Czechs.

By the Czechs.

By the Czechs, yes.

And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

I had-- we were four sisters and three brothers.

Four sisters and three brothers.

Yes. And your father had a small shoe store.

Bata store.

Tell us about that.

Well, it was nice. The store was downtown. And it was beautiful. It had a telephone. And I used to love going there and fool around with the telephone. And my father would get upset because he would get calls from the factory. But believe me, now, when I look back, I see, it was just great. It was just great.

You were very proud of your synagogue. Tell us about your synagogue.

Well, the Jews did everything around the synagogue. And it was a stone synagogue, I remember. And nice things were going on there. People were getting married, they were getting bar mitzvahed. And the town was pulling together. Yes. So I have very good, fond feelings and thoughts about my synagogue.

And you-- among your relatives, you had one uncle, I think, who was serving in the Czech Army at the time.

Yes. We believed in education. So this is my mother's brother, a Czech officer. You see, the Czechs were a democracy, actually. If they would leave them alone, Europe would be in a different position. They knew he was Jewish. And he still was an officer in the army. He said that was his best years.

Helen, of course, later, Hungary would occupy Czechoslovakia, your community. And you and your family would live under Hungarian rule for several years. Tell us about the changes that began when the Hungarians came in and what that meant to yours and your family's life.

Well, what happened was the Hungarians were allied with the Germans. So they probably followed their rules because they were afraid they'll be invaded altogether. So we weren't supposed to go shopping, only after 6:00. At that time, there wasn't much left. And that still bothers me.

I loved going to school. And I sat with my friends. They were Jewish. They were Gentile. They were all kinds of people. And I never noticed that they are different. They never noticed that I was different. And the teachers would call on us. It was wonderful.

But then when the Hungarians came in, the same teachers, when I got into the classroom, I had to sit in the back. And then when we did our homework, we would never call on us. And we felt like my friends that were such good friends, that they were pulling away from me. I would go out there and want to laugh with them. And I want to play with them. And they weren't there for me anymore.

So it became totally segregated.

Sort of, yes. So we would be coming home crying every day. And my father decided that he is going to get a Jewish teacher that was fired because he was Jewish. And after a while, where I lived, our house became like a school. Because

other Jewish kids felt the same stress that we did.

So your father hired him to come to the home--

A teacher, yes.

--to teach.

He lived with us. He was glad to get the job. But we were-- my parents were glad to have him. And after a while, you'll be surprised, most of the Jewish kids were coming to our house to learn. And our house became like a school, actually, for them. He was a very good teacher. He was tough. He expected a lot from us. So it felt better than just sitting there and doing nothing.

Being ignored and not being called upon.

Yeah. Right.

What happened to your father's store under the Hungarians?

Well, this was a Bata store. And when the Hungarians came in, they said, the Jews cannot have a Bata store, because it was a franchise.

It was a franchise, right.

Yeah. And so they took him-- they threw him out of there. And we kids wondered, what's wrong? And so he says, well, the store didn't make enough. But it's not so. My parents were trying to hide the pain from us.

It sounds like they really tried hard to do that.

Very. They thought that it will be over. They didn't think it will last that long. So it was very, very, very hard. But still, in all, they weren't killing us. And they let us live together. And my father did different jobs just to keep us going.

I was going to ask how he managed to make ends meet for you.

It wasn't easy, believe me. We were a big family. It wasn't easy. And my grandma, grandpa lived next door to us. And they had some cows and things. So she gave us certain things that help us out.

Milk, and cheese, and things like that?

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

And we had a cow too. I remember the cow.

And Helen, you would basically manage, as you said. You still were allowed to live together and manage under those circumstances until very early 1944, I think. And that's when the Germans occupied Hungary. And they took control, including all of Czechoslovakia and Hungary, including Volosyanka, your town.

By then, you're an early teenager. Tell us what happened once the Germans came in, took control, what that meant to you, and your family, and your entire community.

Well, when the Germans came in, they told us, the Jews should put a Star of David, a Star of David on the houses. And of course, we had to wear a Star of David on our arms.

So not just on the arm, but also on the house?

Right. And it was-- we just didn't expect that. Because the Hungarians took away the radios from us. We had no connection to the outside world. And it didn't take long that they went on a speaking thing.

And they says, all the Jews should pack up. And they're going to go to Germany. Because at that time, the Jews-- the Germans really occupied most of Europe, if you remember. So we figured to ourselves that we'll go and help them out. And we'll come back.

Well, my grandfather was a very religious man. So all he wanted to take is the Torah scroll with him because how can you live without a Torah scroll that gave us civilization? And he just needed that.

And so everybody packed up a small little suitcase. And my grandpa couldn't because he already had this Torah scroll. So my grandma threw in some clothes for him too because in Europe, it's very cold.

And they got us together, and they took us to a ghetto. We stayed in the ghetto. We didn't know when we leave, what we're going to do. They didn't share anything with us. But-- I'm going to take a drink.

Absolutely, please. I know this is really hard.

When we got to the ghetto, at that time, the Germans had that ghetto already. And they announced that all the old Jews-- there were no other-- go to one place. And when they got together all these old people-- my grandfather was 86 and he had a white beard. To me, he looked like Moses. And when my mother went with him, and when they got there to this place--

And he had the Torah scroll with him?

No.

No.

So he-- they went-- cut his beard. And they were beating him up. And my mother couldn't go and help him because she was afraid they're going to kill him and they're going to kill her. I mean, you don't push the Germans.

So she had to wait for him. And she got him. And she brought him back to the ghetto. And he didn't talk. And he was laying there. He never saw himself without a beard.

And I'm going to take one more drink. We talked to him. He wouldn't answer. He was in a shock. And his face was already swollen.

And my father never cried. And this is the one time I remember, when he looked at him, this poor old man, laying there in shock. So after a few days, my mother took a kerchief and she wrapped around his face. And he was just laying there.

And then a few days later, he started. We were talking between ourselves. And we thought he is in terrible pain, which he probably was. So he says, he heard us talk. But he wouldn't talk. But he says, I didn't feel the pain. I just felt humiliated that they would do this to me.

And what bothers me today is they knew where we're going. They knew, in a few days, they'll put us on cattle cars and send us to Auschwitz. And they did that to so many old people.

Just to humiliate them before they did it.

Right.

Helen, I was going to ask you, before that, to go back just a little bit, right after the Germans came, you also told me just

a very-- very especially sad story that affected you. One of the few treats that you had was to go to a little store to get ice cream. And tell us about that.

I don't know if you have enough time to tell that story.

We'll make it.

Yeah. I have uncles living-- I had uncles living around me. And sometimes if I did a tour for him, they would give me a quarter. So I ran to the store to get myself an ice cream cone. And when I got in the store, I want an ice cream.

And this is a place that you've been many times.

And I played with his kids.

Right.

He says, no, no, you can't get ice cream because you're Jewish. I looked at him, I said, so what's the difference? And I came home crying because he wouldn't give me any ice cream. But I was a little girl, you got to understand. So that wasn't the worst thing that happened to me. It's just--

Very symbolic, though.

I mean, I was an innocent little kid, didn't bother anybody, didn't hurt anybody. And on top of it, what bothered me is that I played with his kids. And his kids were in our house many times. And I went to visit his house. And he says that to me. But maybe he was afraid he's going to get punished for giving me an ice cream cone. I don't know what to think anymore.

So that was the case.

I just remembered you telling me that. And I just wanted for you to share that. When you were forced into the Uzhgorod ghetto, what happened to your father and your brothers?

Well, that didn't happen-- in the Uzhgorod ghetto, we were still together.

You're still together. Then--

When we got to Auschwitz, when they packed us into the cattle cars and took us to Auschwitz, this is when the big tragedy happened. When we got to Auschwitz, Mengele-- I don't know. I'm sure a lot of people heard about Mengele. He played God in Auschwitz. He told people who should live and who should die.

I remember his face. He looked like an uncle that you can trust. I have a picture of him, but he looked better in person. He looked like he was polished. Well, anyway. So my sister--

This is after you've arrived in cattle cars. You've had this trip. And you-- all crushed together in the cattle car, you get to Auschwitz, and you get off the trains.

Yeah. Well, they didn't let us out until it got a little darker. And when we stopped there, the smell was terrible. Why? Because at the time, when we got there, they could gas 10,000 people a day. And they didn't know what to do with the corpse. So--

Please.

Sorry. So it smelled like human flesh is burning. And we didn't know what to make out of it. And when it got a little darker, the flashlights came in. And they opened the door. And they says, heraus, heraus. That means--

Get out.

--get out, get out. And they told us to put everything we brought into the ditch across from there. So everybody did it.

But my grandfather wouldn't part with his Torah scrolls. And a monster ran over to her. And he says, throw down the Torah scrolls. And he said-- and he didn't. So he got beaten up. So my mother ran to him to save him.

So he says to her, I told him that it's a sin. It's a sin. They don't understand. So they were beating him up. They were beating him up until he fell on the ground.

And for us-- my mother, my sister, and my little brother-- they-- well, my mother was holding on to my little brother. And to the right, to the right-- we were running to the right. And I don't know what made me look back. I saw he's on the ground. And they're still beating him.

And I cried out from my heart, somebody, help, please. Somebody, help him. Nobody came. Nobody came to help. I was so afraid this will happen to me.

And your little brother, Efraim, was with your mother.

Well, my little brother, Efraim, my mother was holding him by the hand. And she noticed that he had a book. He loved books. In Europe, there wasn't that many toys. And that wasn't-- there wasn't that much money either. So if we ever got a present, that would be a book.

My mother was afraid they're going to beat him up. So she begged him to throw it away. He wouldn't throw it away. He couldn't understand why he has to throw away his favorite book.

He was six, right?

He was six.

Six.

And so they were negotiating. And finally, he gave her the book, to my mother. And my mother threw it in the ditch. And he cried. He cried.

And as we were running to the right, a monster came over and was pulling him away. So there was a little problem because my mother was telling him, oh, he's only six. I have to take care of him.

Well, the monster was stronger than my mother. And she saw my brother crying. And my brother was trying to run to my mother. He was getting beaten up. So she ran after him.

She got beaten up. And finally, she went to the left with my brother. Maybe she could have lived through it. I don't know, maybe not. I don't know.

But she went with your brother.

But it makes me feel like at least she was a comfort to him. She was a comfort. And knowing my mother, she probably comforted a lot of kids that were pulled away from their parents.

So you've gone to the right with your sister, Sylvia.

My sister only because my--