

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 today. We are in our 13th year of First Person. Our first person today is Mrs. Regina Spiegel, whom we shall meet shortly. This 2012 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin 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 guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue until mid-August. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

Regina Spiegel will share with us her first-person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Regina a few questions at the end of our program. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Regina is one person's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction. And we begin with this portrait of Regina Spiegel, who was born May 12, 1926 in Radom, Poland. Her father worked as a leather cutter for a large shoe manufacturer. And her mother took care of their six children. On this map of Europe, the arrow points to Poland. And on this map of Poland, the arrow points to Radom.

On September 1, 1939, German troops invaded Poland. And Regina's town was attacked a few days later. Like all Jews in Radom, Regina's family was ordered into a newly-created ghetto. Regina's parents decided to smuggle her out of the ghetto by bribing one of the guards. She escaped to Pionki, where her older sister, Rozia, lived. Soon, Regina was conscripted for forced labor in the town's munition factory. There, she formed a close friendship with Sam Spiegel, a fellow inmate. This photograph is of Regina's sister, Chanka, who was taken from the ghetto and sent to Treblinka, where she was killed.

We close the slide presentation with a photograph of Regina and Sam on their wedding day in the Fohrenwald displaced persons camp in Bavaria after the war. Upon Regina and Sam's arrival in Washington, DC in late 1947, Sam found work as a sheet metal worker, and over time, built a successful business in the construction industry. Regina and Sam have continued to live in the Washington, DC area since then.

They have three daughters and nine grandchildren, with the youngest being 10 years old. Their first great-grandchild, a girl, was born this past September. Regina has spoken many times about her experience during the Holocaust to a wide variety of groups, including at numerous schools. In fact, she spoke at my daughter's former high school in Maryland.

Just recently, Regina spoke to a very large group in Tucson, Arizona. Regina's volunteer work for the museum includes working at the donor's desk, where you will find her on Wednesdays, except for today. Sam was an active volunteer here at the museum, but his recent illness has prevented him from continuing. He spent a lot of time working on the Remember the Child Who Perished program, which calls upon young Jews, as part of their bar and bat mitzvahs, to honor children who died during the Holocaust. Sam searched for the names of children who perished, the name of the town from which they came, and when and where they perished.

Until recently, Regina and Sam participated every other year in the March of the Living, which took them to Auschwitz-Birkenau and to other major camps, as well as to Israel in most years. They went on 10 Marches of the Living. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Regina Spiegel.

Regina, welcome, and thank you so much for being willing to be our first person today. We have a limited amount of time and a whole lot to cover. So we'll get started. And I thought we might begin, Regina, by first-- Germany was-- Germany invaded Poland September 1, 1939. And you were 13, living in Radom. Tell us, first, a little bit about you and your family and community before the war began and then what happened once the Germans came in.

Well, it should be very easy. I had a wonderful childhood. I had a wonderful family. Maybe they weren't so wonderful, but especially now, it seems that it was heaven, anyway. And Radom was a fairly nice city. We had synagogues. We had a theater, a movies. And as a kid, I used to attend school, Polish school. And I also went to a Jewish day school in the evening to learn about the Jewish customs.

And of course, as Bob said, the minute the Germans came into our town, this-- all this frivolous life came to an abrupt stop. Why? Because somehow, they were running a war. But they were very busy with the Jews. Every day that they were there, there were different orders. Anything of value, you had to give up, of course. Maybe you saved a little bit, just in case. But on the whole, they really took everything away from you.

But my mother was a very resourceful woman. And she managed to go around, and barter with the Polish neighbors, and bring a little bit extra food because we-- all of a sudden, the stores were closed. We weren't-- and of course-- but for me, especially as a child of 13 years old, I really missed my school. Because for the Jewish children, the schools were closed. You can imagine that even the adults couldn't believe.

And of course, I was already-- I had finished the seventh grade. So I spoke, could write a little bit, could read some. But some young people were supposed to go to school. So the older people, they managed to form groups, and taking to cellars in the city, and teaching the ABC too. Because they were so afraid that they will miss something. Because after all, it cannot be they will open the schools for us. But you know what? They needn't bother because the children were basically their first victims. They were of no use to them whatsoever.

Gina, you told me that your father, who was in the shoe business, lost his job almost overnight when the Germans came.

Of course. There was no money coming in. That's why the hunger started. And of course, as I said, my mother was a very resourceful woman. And she managed to bring in some food into the house. But when they noticed that we are managing to survive, they thought of something else. What do they do? They made a ghetto.

Now, what is a ghetto in Radom, Poland? They took a section of the city, put wire around, and within three days, you had to leave your homes and move into the place where they assigned you. As you saw from the picture, we were a fairly large family. They assigned to us one little room-- and not only this, with somebody else together. So you can imagine, hunger set in.

And it really-- once they opened the ghettos, we realized that we are in a lot of trouble because there was no food, no-- I mean there was no life there as a child of 13 years old. All of a sudden, I had to grow up because-- since I was the youngest one, sometimes, they relied on me, that maybe I could go when they selling some bread. Maybe I can go and bring it home.

But it wasn't too-- I don't know why, but especially in Poland, we had also a big problem because some of the kids used to-- if they recognized you, they would point you out as a Jew. And of course, pretty soon, they didn't even have to point at us because we were wearing an armband within our city. It was a white one with blue. And inside it said Jude, which meant Jew. It identified us right away, who we were. Especially at the age of 10, you already had to wear it. So things were horrible.

If you don't mind, tell us how many brothers and sisters you had.

Yeah, I had two brothers and four sisters.

So the seven children, your parents-- were you all together there?

No.

Except for-- you had at least one sister in Pionki.

In Pionki. And we had also an aunt with us that was elderly. And she stayed with us. So wherever we went, she went

with us.

Tell us about the role that your sister played in helping you out.

Well, the sister-- I had one sister who lived. Is it OK?

I think we're OK.

I had-- one of my sisters lived in a small town, which was about 30 kilometers from Radom. The name of the place was Pionki-- P-I-O-N-K-I. The reason I'm spelling this word because I think if young people want to check it up, it's still there. And it was actually a very famous place because it had one of the largest powder munition factories in Poland. And therefore, it became a great factor in my survival and the survival of many others. Because the Germans opened a camp there, a slave labor camp. And that's where they in.

And of course, my sister-- when you said that my mother smuggled me out from the ghetto, it wasn't like that. Because my parents didn't have the money to bribe the guys that watched our ghetto. It was my sister who was working. And she made some money-- not too much-- because she was working with another dentist. And she was the one.

Because during the war, what's the main? Especially like wheat, the main thing is bread. Food-- food is the most part. So all of a sudden, the farmers realized that when they opened their mouth, that basically they didn't have any teeth. Why? Because the farmers in Poland didn't have the money for-- we know, when we go to a dentist here, we know what we have to pay. And over there, wasn't quite that expensive, but it was expensive.

So when they would come to my sister and they would say, Ruzska, look at my teeth, could you fix them? She said, oh, I will make them for you. And it won't cost you a penny. And they said, how are you going to do that? She said, very simple. You get my sister out from the ghetto, and I will make you the teeth and no charge.

And a farmer, he fell for it. He would do it. And she did his teeth. And he was actually the one that knew the people that guarded the gates. Because you see, the Germans didn't guard the ghettos. They had other people who were following them. And they did it very willingly.

So as a result, when my mother finally persuaded me to leave-- because I will tell you a secret. Because I didn't want to leave. And you would say, crazy. You were starving. Why not? And no matter how bad things were, you wanted to be with your family. This was the most important thing in our way of life. And if-- when my mother said, you have to leave, I thought that she probably wants to get rid of me.

And you know what? I left there and never said goodbye to my mother because I was so angry with her that later on, all through the war, I think that I survived because that's all I wanted to do is get back and tell my mother how sorry I was for thinking these kind of thoughts about her. But of course, I never had a chance because probably after I left the ghetto, maybe within a week, they came and liquidated the whole ghetto.

There were probably-- we had a population of about 30,000 Jews. And there were in the ghetto maybe even more because people were coming from the smaller towns because they figured it's better, maybe, in a bigger town. But it wasn't so. But about 20,000 Jews, they loaded on these cattle trains.

And they shipped them to a place Treblinka. I don't even refer to Treblinka as a camp because it was nothing of the kind. It was strictly a death factory. Because people were coming in there, they were shipping them in day and night. And what had happened? They never saw anybody again. It was the most horrible thing.

My husband and I went back there after the war to see what it was because it always bothered me. I always thought, maybe I would get some kind of relief that I'll be able to talk to her. But of course, it's just a make believe. But it didn't change.

Regina, so you're-- against your wishes, of course, you-- they were able to smuggle you out with the help of your sister.

Tell us about your train trip to Pionki. You're a 13-year-old girl. You just can't hop on a train. Tell us about that.

Well, I-- once I was on the outside-- and I had to take off my armband too because the guard told me to do that. You take that because I was hoping that he will send me back. But he didn't. But I, being on the outside, I said, I have to do something. I didn't even have \$0.05 to myself, nothing. I just left. And I got on a train. I knew where the trains were in our city. So I ran there. And I got on the train.

During that time, we had in Poland that-- because it was during-- school was off during that time, that children, if they traveled with the parents, they didn't need a ticket. So when I got into the train, and here I see somebody walking around, checking for their tickets, I said, what am I going to do? I saw a woman sitting there. And I sat down next to her. And I started talking to her. And I guess when the guy came in and saw me talking to her, he figured, she is probably-- this is her mother. And he didn't even ask for my ticket. So that's how I got.

And when I got to my sister's, I was a little bit taken care of. Because my sister, being a dentist, she had a little bit of privileges that even in the camp-- but from there, the Germans did open a camp. And as a matter of fact, it always amazes me to this day, they were killing children. But when you got in, you wanted to get in into that camp, particular, you had to be 16 years old. And I didn't qualify yet.

So when they sent me back, my sister had a very good friend who was the main man in the factory from before the war still. Because he was taking care-- he was the main CEO or whatever you call him in that factory. And when my sister told him they wouldn't take my sister in, he said, don't worry. Give me her papers.

And do you know that this man changed my papers? If he hadn't, I probably wouldn't have been here. And eventually, he was caught. And I always begged my sister to give me his name. But she never wanted to do it. I guess she was afraid that you know what? Maybe-- sometimes, when they caught you, if you didn't-- they knew when you were lying or you knew something. So you-- sometimes, they made you-- they had very good ways to make you tell them something. So she never wanted to tell me. And I understand that he was actually caught doing that for a long time because when he did it for me, he did it for other people too. And they caught him. And he was sent to Auschwitz and never came back.

What were you forced to do once you got the papers and you were able to now work as a slave laborer? What were you forced to do?

And what I worked on-- now, when I think of it, the stuff that I was dragging is-- it doesn't make sense. Because we used to load the powder, the black powder from the factory-- we used to load it on little trains that go on that are being shipped. And we-- a girl and I used to lift up these things that must have weighed a ton, maybe more, I don't know, and lift it up.

We used to throw it up like this, that I will never forget when my boyfriend with another guy came by where we were working, this girl and I. And they thought, oh, such a fun day, nothing to it. So they tried to lift it up. And they couldn't touch it, really, because it's so heavy, unbelievable. To this day, I cannot figure out how we managed to pick these things up. But basically, that's what we did.

And in 1944-- I actually was in that camp to 1944, which gave me a chance to grow up, that when they brought us to Auschwitz-Birkenau, we were already like people, like workers. We grew. I got taller. So I didn't have to stand on my tippy toes. And I think this probably saved our life.

Regina, before we turn to when you did go to Auschwitz, a couple of other things I'd like you to share with us-- one of them is your sister had a baby. Will you tell us about the baby and about your sister?

Yeah. You see, my sister had a baby that, at the time, when she gave him away, when I came, he was 18 months old. But at the time, when I came, she gave him away to a Polish couple to keep him. But my sister kept touch with her. She knew where my sister was working because, you see, every camp had to have a little hospital.

Most of the people wouldn't go to the hospital because once you were in a hospital, sometimes, you didn't come out. Because periodically, they would clean out the hospitals of the people. So nobody really went so much. But at least they figured, in case if somebody from the Red Cross should come by and ask, you have so many people. Do you know, we were probably there about 4,000 or 5,000 people in that factory?

And say you have so many people-- what do you do when you-- they get sick? What are you talking about? We even take care of their teeth. We have a dentist. We have a doctor. We have nurses for them. We take good care of them. So that was the end of it. But of course, I went to see this woman after the war. And--

This is the war--

--they came--