

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 today. We are in our 13th year of the First Person program. Our first person today is Mrs. Erika Eckstut, 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. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

Erika Eckstut 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 at the end of our program, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Erika a few questions. 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 was born June 12, 1928 in Znojmo, Czechoslovakia. The first arrow on this map of Europe points to Czechoslovakia. In 1931, Erika, her sister, and parents moved to the province of Bukovina, the home of Erika's paternal grandparents. And the arrow here points to Romania, where Bukovina is located.

Erika Eckstut was 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's father, Ephram, poses here with the students of the Stanesti Hebrew school, which he founded. Erika, Beatrice, and Ephram are in this photo. And you can see Ephram at the top. And here, we see Erika with a circle around her. Erika also attended public school.

Here, we see 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 Neuman, and Ephram Newman. 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.

And here, we see Erika reading a magazine in the Cernauti ghetto. 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.

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. She eventually emigrated to the United States in 1960. Erika lives here in the Washington, DC area with her husband, Donnie, whom she married in 1963. And I'd like to note that Donnie is here with us-- Donnie, if you wouldn't mind raising your hand. And they will-- and in January, this coming January, they will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

Although Erika was not able to resume her medical studies that she began in Prague, Czechoslovakia after the war, she started a career here as a medical technician. Erika has a son and a daughter, six grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren, and one of whom graduates-- one of the great-grandchildren graduates this coming week from high school.

Erika volunteers here at the museum's donor and membership desk, where you'll find her here on Fridays. She speaks frequently about her Holocaust experience and especially enjoys speaking at schools and military installations. 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's bookstore. And with that, I'd like you to join me in welcoming our first person Mrs. Erika Eckstut.

[APPLAUSE]

Hello. I had an operation, the third time on my knee, so I can't walk very well.

But you sure talk very well.

I talk. My mouth is all right, but my knee is not.

Well, Erika, welcome and thank you so much for your willingness to be our first person today. We have so much for you to cover in just an hour period. So let's get started.

OK. I'm ready.

You were born in a small town, as we saw, in Czechoslovakia. But then when you were young, you moved to a small town in Romania. In 1940, Romania was occupied by the Russians. But then later, in 1941, the Russians were pushed out, and the Germans entered Romania, which, of course, forever changed your family's life. Before we turn to those terrible years of the war and the Holocaust, why don't you start first by telling us about your family and your early years before the war.

My family-- I will first tell you what my family consisted of. I had a father and mother. I had one sister, who was older than me. That was really my very bad thing because I wanted to be the oldest. But when I talked to her, which I call her every single day-- and when I say something which is not exactly proper, she says, you know who the oldest is? I said, yes, I do. I don't like it, but I can't help it.

And I-- when we came there in 1931, I just liked-- I just met my grandparents. I never knew them. And I liked my grandfather like nobody ever liked anybody. And he had a horse, a cow, and chickens. And he needed somebody to take care of them. And that's why we didn't go because my father wanted to go to Palestine. But my grandfather kept saying, he needed somebody to take care of his animals. They're all alive. And so I was very young at that time. I was with my grandfather every day. And we used to come there almost every day.

My sister was like a little princess. When I was born, she could already read. She read when she was five. And she didn't like to play with me. I loved to play with her. I wanted to play with her. But she wouldn't. She liked her books. And so I went to my grandfather.

My grandfather put me to the chickens. And he said, you look, and you find eggs, and bring them. And he gave me a little thing where I will put them. I always found eggs there. And I brought them. And I was so proud of how many eggs I found. And every day, my grandfather was so nice. And he had a sense of humor like nobody ever had.

And every single day, my grandmother, when we came in the afternoon, would say, look how she looks. And my grandfather said, she looks good. What's wrong with her? She's all dirty. He said, that's nothing. Water will wash it down. Don't worry. Always, she bothered him that I didn't look good. But my grandfather always thought that I look very good.

Then when I was about six, when I started to go to Hebrew school and to Romanian school, my grandfather bought me a horse, a short-- a small horse, not a big horse like he had. And we used to go riding together. We had a life like I can't even describe how wonderful a life we had, and how much I loved everybody. I mean, I loved my grandmother. Of course, my father, and mother, and my sister-- everybody, I loved.

And then when it started to-- start not to be so good, I couldn't even understand what's going on. And we had to start--

then when the Holocaust started-- and it started when I was about nine or 10.

Erika, before we move to that, let me just ask you a couple more questions. Tell us a little bit about your father.

My father was the most wonderful man you have ever met. I couldn't understand him at all. But I got a lot of lectures from him. He never, ever-- or my mother would put the hand on me like that. But I had to sit very quietly for an hour and listen to his-- whatever he had to tell me. I didn't do everything right. I wasn't exactly a good little girl.

In fact, you described yourself to me as a wild duck.

Like a wild duck, that's about a good thing to describe myself. And I was always very nice when my father gave me the lecture. I was sitting there. You can't imagine how hard it was for me to sit there for an hour and listen to what I did wrong. And I knew I did wrong because he told me that already for so many times that I really knew it. But I really can't begin to tell you how it was. It was so nice to be with my grandfather.

And then he asked me, what's going on? Because I went to school. And he said, what's going on in the Hebrew school? I said, when the school year is over, we have a little show. And some kids have to learn a poem. And I have to learn a long poem. And my father is teaching me the poem. And when my father taught me the poem, I had to know it perfect. There was no two ways about it.

I liked to come to my grandfather. And when we had that before this school year was over, I couldn't come to my grandfather because I had to learn the poem. And then when I came, he said, how come you didn't come? I said, because I had to learn the poem. I couldn't come. And he said, when do you have that show? And I told him, on Saturday, this or this day.

And he said, before you go to the poem, you come to me. And I will give you the cherries. You see, my grandfather had in the garden sour cherries. And he made wine from it. I didn't know it was wine or anything. I liked the cherries. I never liked water. Now, I have only one kidney. And I have to drink two liter of water, which I drank today before I came here. And I couldn't help it. I liked the cherries.

So before I went to the show, I came to my grandfather. And he gave me a nice bowl full of cherries. And I ate them all because I really liked them. I didn't like water. But I liked the cherries very, very much. And when I finished it, I went to tell my poem, I started the poem with the last thing which was there. Then I realized, it's not right. So I started from the beginning. And I did a very good job because they were clapping like they never heard a poem as good as mine. So I was very proud of it.

And I went out. When I came out, my father was there. And he said, breathe on me. I did. And then I heard my grandfather, if you have a question, ask me. Don't ask her. And then I didn't hear anything anymore. And I heard later that they didn't talk to each other for a whole week. It was--

Fermented cherries that you had.

--fermented cherries. I didn't know it was wine. I really didn't. I liked them. But I never knew it was wine.

Erika, 1941, when the Germans entered your town, life for the Jewish community changed immediately.

Oh, that was the most terrible thing which happened. When the Germans came, we had to go into a ghetto. In the ghetto, the life was nothing like before, nothing. And it was so bad. It-- I can't-- really and truly, I don't have the words to use to describe it, how bad it was. There was no food. There was really nothing to drink. We got some water in the morning and a little piece of bread like that, not really bigger than that.

And I remember that when I was asked, what did I get to eat? I used to say, a little piece of bread. And I didn't know if it was water or whatever, but something like water. It didn't taste like anything. In the evening, we used to get something like a soup. It didn't taste like a soup at all.

And my father had a very good idea because in the ghetto, there were lawyers, doctors, teachers, professors, students, all kinds of people. So my father felt, if those people would talk to us, let's say, about history, or geography, or whatever, they would have chosen to talk. We should ask the question from the thing, whatever they were talking about. And my father taught us too. And he asked me about two, three times.

I never had an answer. I never had a question. When it was about the fourth time, he said after, are you listening at all? I said, no. He said, what are you doing? I said, I'm dreaming of a piece of bread. And my father looked at me. He was so sad. He was so sad that I can't even begin to tell you how sad he was.

And it was against the law to go out of the ghetto. It was outside the ghetto, there were signs that if-- the Jews have to be all in the ghetto. And if they find anybody who is not Jewish who helps a Jew, he and his family will be killed. I didn't have any friends in the ghetto because we were in Stanesti. And that was in Czernowitz. Czernowitz was the capital of Bukovina. And the way we went to Czernowitz was when the Russians had to leave, afterwards, about three men came to our house. And they said we have to go with them.

And Erika, this is before you went to the ghetto.

That's before we went. I'm sorry. I went a little too fast. And when the Russians said that we have to go with them, when we came, we came to a park. And there were a lot of people. And there stood the rabbi and his two sons. And they killed them. And they started to take one man after another. And then they took my uncle.

It was the worst thing I have ever seen because I never saw any adult getting hurt. But they were killing these two sons, the rabbi. They never told us anything. And as soon as it happened, the kids started to cry something terrible. And the adults started to say the Kaddish, which you say when a Jewish man dies.

And it was really terrible. And then when they took my uncle, they shot him once, but they didn't kill him. And they killed him by hand. It was unbelievable how bad it was. And then after that, they said that we are going to go to a place where there is room. And the next day, we'll come there.

Erika, just before you move on, you were all gathered. They killed hundreds. And eventually, it got dark, and they ran out of ammunition.

Ammunition, yeah.

And that's the only reason that you didn't get killed there, right?

That's absolutely right. I mean, then-- but for us, was that a man came to my father. And he said to him, I will take you home. My father said, I'm not going go. And he said, I will take your parents too. And he took us. And so we got to Czernowitz. You see, I went too fast. And when we came to Czernowitz, we were in the ghetto. And in the ghetto, where it was so bad, and my father had us all-- and when he talked to me, he was very, very sad. And he left me.

When he left me-- you saw that I had an ID from the ghetto on the pictures-- before, they showed it. And I took the picture. And I had to wear the star on my coat. And I left it where I slept on the floor somewhere. And I went out. At that time, I was 12 years old. I really didn't know what's going on because there was no television. There was no computer. There was nothing. I didn't know what's going on at all.

And when I went outside, I have heard my mother talk that my father has a friend there, which he had when he was a little boy. And he didn't want to go to him because he didn't want him to have problems and get killed, like they said they would kill. So he didn't want to go to him, to his friend. And then came our place, that we had to go to the concentration camp. When we came to the place where we had to go to the concentration camp--

Erika, I'm going to jump in for a minute here. Before you left the ghetto, I want you to tell about when you were sneaked out of the ghetto--

That's when I sneaked out.

--and what happened when you were out.

When I was out, I went to go where they-- I knew that the priest-- he was a priest, a Greek priest.

The friend of your father's.

A friend of my father. And I went where they were selling for priests and nuns. And I got whatever I thought was mainly bread. And when it came to paying, I told the-- I knew the name of the priest, that he's going to pay for it. And they wrote it down. They said, is this how you write it? I had no idea. I said, of course, I didn't know if it was right or wrong.

But when I came home, my mother fainted. And my father wanted to know how I paid. And I told my father, I gave the name of your friend. He said, how do you know that I have a friend? I said, I heard it somewhere, but I can't remember where. He said, how come you can't remember? I said, I don't know. I didn't want to tell him that I listened to my mother because he didn't like lying at all. And if he found out that I'm lying, it would be very bad. And I couldn't give my mother's name, no way.

And he said, that's all right. You'll have to go tomorrow and tell him what you did. When tomorrow came and I went there, I met the priest. He was a very nice man. And I was crying before I could say anything. And the priest said, what did you do? And I told him that I used his name and I bought food. He said-- and I said that my father was very upset that I gave his name.

He said, don't worry about your father. Don't worry. You can go and do it as much as you want. Everything is going to be paid. Don't worry. And don't worry about your father. But I was so worried.

You see, I never thought that nothing is going to happen to me. I walked out of the ghetto, never anybody asked me, do you have an ID or not? But you see, I have blue eyes and I had blonde hair. Now, it's very blonde. But that's lately, when I got younger. It got-- but when I came back, I told my father whatever happened. And I went once a week out to shop. And I never took my ID, never anybody asked me about anything. And I did it almost a year.

Then once, when I came out, there was a soldier. And he was beating a man who was on the street. And the priest had told me, don't tell anybody what you are doing. I never did. Now, it got to me that I have to give him a thing what my father gives me all those-- these-- I always get from my father a lecture. So I could--

Lecture the soldier who was beating this man?

Yeah. So I gave him a lecture. I said, you can get into trouble with the police. I said, that man down there is bleeding. He said, that's not a man. That's a Jew. And I didn't think it's a difference, but I didn't say nothing. And then that policeman came. And he said to me, little girl, we have to go home because you are-- you have to go home. And I knew I couldn't go home because everybody who was in the ghetto knew that if you do anything, your whole family is going to be killed. And we had our grandparents and my parents.

So you couldn't let him know that you were living in the ghetto.

I did not let him.

No, you couldn't let him know that, yeah.

No, no. But when-- it was a little house. There were a lot of them. So I went to one of the houses. And I rang the bell. And I said, Mama. And the woman opened the door. And the policeman said, is that your daughter, Madame? She didn't pay attention. She said to me, I told you once with the finger, twice, home and homework. I didn't know what to do. I

never did anything.

And she said it about three times. And then she started to hit me right and left. But her hands were like-- I don't know what, but they were so bad that I felt my head is going fall down any second now. I have nothing to worry about. And then I heard like in a dream, the policemen say to her, stop hitting her. Take her in. She will do the homework.

And she took me in. She wanted to know where I'm from. And I told her. And you see, I thought, she's going to take me in. But she was a very nice lady because she did save my life-- hers too, if she would have said something. So I went home. And it came our time that we had to go to the concentration camp.

When we were on the place where we had to go to the concentration camp, my father thought he saw somebody he knew. And he waved. As soon as he waved, a soldier came. And he had-- I don't know if it was wood or whatever. And he went after my father. And I threw myself on top of my father. And my father didn't get nothing. I got it all.

My father walked with a cane. He was wounded very badly in the First World War. And he also lost a brother. Now, I have a little-- and I also walk with something. But I can't walk with a cane. I walk with a little walker. I'm supposed to get rid of it. I don't know when because my knee is not all right.