

Where should I go now?

Well, I think-- I think at some point, you weren't deported, you're in the ghetto, and your parents make this major decision to try to get you and your sister out.

That's when my father-- when we came home, my father talked to my mother, and asked her-- because, you see, my mother was blonde, blue-eyed, and she spoke German beautiful, because that was her language. And we also spoke German, but our mother's tongue was also German. But we knew also Czech.

And those two languages, I never forgot. I knew six when I came to America. And I forgot Romanian. I forgot Hebrew. I forgot French. And I know now three languages-- German, Czech, and I try to speak English. So I'm--

And you do beautifully.

Thank you very much.

So your-- it's time-- your parents have decided it's time to get you out of the ghetto.

Yes. So my father asked my mother if she would go, and she said, yeah. And she put her star around her coat and on top the coat. When she went there, he said, where are the children? She said, home. And he said, I would have made them Greek Orthodox, but I can't.

And the papers you'll get won't be all right. You have to tell the children not to show them if they can help it. And he gave her two papers and two crosses, two golden crosses. And then we were supposed to leave.

We left 15-- three months before it was four years. We left after three and three quarters-- we were there in the ghetto.

In the ghetto.

And then we went, and we were in Kyiv.

So you and your sister were posing as Greek Orthodox.

Orthodox, and my father was talking to us. And I told you, I couldn't understand my father at all. He talked to us maybe for two hours. And he told us, now you are going to meet all kinds of people, different colors, different religions. And you have to be nice to every single person you meet. I couldn't understand my father at all. What do you mean to everybody? To the Germans too?

So I asked my father, please can I just hate the Germans? He said, no, you can't. If you'll hate the Germans, the Holocaust will never, ever finish. And to be honest, it's still going on. It's not really and truly as bad as it was, but it's very bad.

Because when we were in the Holocaust, there wasn't one country who came to help us. But America knew what was going on. Because one of the diplomats, who was Polish, came to the United States.

And he went-- because they had-- the ghetto was in-- in the main city. And he went there. And then when he came, he talked to your president. And he told him what's going on. But he couldn't do nothing. Anyway--

So, Erika, you leave the ghetto. You and your sister walk out. Do you remember what it was like for you to leave your parents behind?

I don't think-- you see, every day I had to pray when I went to sleep. And every night, I always said, dear God, give me a day. My friends asked me, why do you ask for a day? Why are you so stupid? Ask for a month. I said, I heard when

you ask a lot, you get nothing.

So I asked always for a day. And I used to get a day. So I never asked for more. But, you see, when we left our father, and we went there, like I told you, our mother's tongue was German. When we were in Russia, we spoke German. When we were alone, nobody was there, we spoke German with each other.

And one time we went there, and we was talking, and we were talking German. And so a policeman came, and he said we are going with him. When he was there, my sisters-- as we walked, she said, you have to tell him the truth. We cannot show him the papers. The papers are not all right, and we have to tell him the truth.

I said, how can I tell him the truth? I have nothing but the cross and the papers. How can I tell him the truth? You have to. And she was the oldest. I mean, don't forget that, because she never lets me forget that.

So, I, of course, when I came there, I told him that I'm really Jewish, and I ran away from the Germans. And my sister told him the same. And he put us in the jail. When we came in the jail, my sister says, I have in my shoe a razor blade. And I want you to cut your vein, and I'll cut mine, and it's going to be finished.

I said, I'm not going cut nothing. I don't want to make it easier for them. I will not cut nothing. You have to. I said, not me. I'm not going cut. If you want to cut, cut, but I don't-- I'm not cutting nothing. And I didn't.

And then there came the policeman. And it was around April when we were there. And he asked my sister-- I think, he wants my sister because she was older. And he said, what kind of holiday do you have now? She said, I think the only holiday we can have is Passover.

And he looks at me, and he said, what do you have to know? I knew what I had to know-- four questions. I knew one, and I was happy I knew the one. So I didn't know what's going to happen, and I started [NON-ENGLISH]. And he said, that's enough. I said, God was listening. And he said, that's all right. That was enough.

And when he said it's enough, he opened the door and let us go. We were so sad, really. We didn't know his name, and he says to us, I am Jewish too. But we didn't know his name, just that he was Jewish. So we left.

And you see, during the time-- I mean, it didn't go as fast as I'm telling it-- it was really very bad. And we had an old lady-- she wasn't old, but for us, we called her the old lady. I don't remember her name. She was with us because we had a place to stay, then we didn't have it.

This is in Kyiv.

In Kyiv.

In Kyiv.

And one day, I had some job I got in the hospital. And there was a nurse. And the nurse saw my sister. And she said, she has-- she told the police that I have a sister who is German. Because her hair was so blonde, and her eyes-- I mean, I was nothing like her at all. I had dark blonde, but not-- not like I am now, nothing like that.

And your sister spoke German.

She spoke German fluently, I mean, really. So I immediately went home. And I went to visit the nurse on December 24-- or I don't know when it was exactly. And she told me-- she told me that she had told the policeman that my sister is German. When I heard that, I didn't know what to say.

And I usually stayed there till 8:00. And I went home. And I told the old lady and my sister what happened. So the old lady said we have to leave right now. We didn't have anything to carry anyway. Because that was a story in itself. We lost our things.

So we went. And we came to a place. And we [INAUDIBLE] what? What?

The forest.

To the forest.

To the forest. I can't remember that in English if my life depended on it.

So it's you, your sister, and this person you called the old lady.

The old lady.

Who is probably 45, right?

No, she wasn't. She was 37.

37.

[LAUGHTER]

We found out. We didn't know. I mean, we didn't know. We were kids. So it wasn't-- she wasn't-- 37. Anyway, so all of a sudden, we heard-- when we were in the-- do you know the military, whatever it was--

Password.

Password.

Thanks, Donny.

I have about five, six words I can't remember in English. So you have to excuse me. My husband is here, so he can help me.

So the soldiers in the woods-- in the forest asked for your password.

Yeah. And then, she was talking, the old lady. And then all of a sudden, a flashlight came on. And it went on the old lady. And before we knew what happened, she and the guy who asked us were kissing. So we didn't know what's going on. But then the lady said that's her younger son. She had an older one too, but she didn't know where he is. And her husband was killed before she came to Kyiv.

So he went to the-- to the officers and asked them if he could take us with them. And the policeman-- the officer said, no, because we didn't have any uniforms.

Right.

We couldn't go.

You're just civilians.

We are just civilians. So then when we couldn't go, half an hour later, her son came. And he said he will take his mother and two of the policemen-- I mean, two of the-- are going to take two-- two boys took us.

And when we came to Poland, they--

Did they take you in tanks?

In tanks.

In tanks. They took you in tanks, yeah.

And when we came to Poland, they took us out, the old lady and us. And he went with us to a house and asked if she had a room for three people. And she said, yes, we have to go upstairs. So we went upstairs. And my sister wasn't with us. And you see, Polish and Czech is from this-- is the same thing, from the same background.

And when you speak Polish, I could understand. Not everything, but I would say about 70%, 60% I could understand. And my sister came and she said, we have to run right now. And the lady starts to talk. She's going take care of us and whatever. And she said, no. She heard the lady say that she has here three Jews, and you can have them if you want them.

So she-- she said, we'll open the window.

And you're in the attic, right?

We are in the attic.

Yeah.

And she said, you just throw the lady out, she tells me. And she goes, and she jumps.

Your sister jumps first.

My sister jumps first. And she was so little in comparison. The lady was a little on the chubby side. And I said, would you like to go to the window? She said, no. So I pushed her, and I threw her down. My sister couldn't catch her, but she broke-- she broke her fall. And then I looked-- she didn't-- nobody held their hands for me. So I just jumped.

But she didn't break your fall.

No. No, she didn't-- she didn't even touch me. She didn't. And I went too. And we went into a big car. We saw a Czech-- we didn't even know it's Czech.

But you ran from her house at that point.

We ran away as fast as we could. And the old lady trampled after us. She couldn't run. But we got a big car. And we went. And we came to Snina. Snina was in Slovakia. And as you know that now it's not Czechoslovakia. It's Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

So when we came to Snina, there were a lot of Czech officers, and soldiers, and all. And when they saw us, they gave us food. And we didn't have any food for a few days, so we ate. What they gave us, I have no idea. But I know we ate everything they gave us. We were so sick, all three of us. You can't imagine.

And then they started to say what they're going to do with us. They took the lady immediately, because she was 37 years old-- not an old lady, but she was 37. And my sister could have also joined the army, but--

So they put her, the--

The old lady--

The 37-- the old lady, they put her in the army.

They put her in the army. I mean, she had really a son in the army, so they put her. My sister didn't want to. And she had-- there was an officer, who they would come and look at us, like we are something to look at. And he wanted to marry my sister. She was really a beautiful lady.

But she didn't want to get married. She didn't want to leave me. And the next day, the soldiers and all left. And in our place, where we stayed with the man, they threw a stone in the window, and they broke the window. And the man was a very nice guy. And he said, I will take you to Humenná. It was another place in Slovakia.

And he took us to a lady who had a little boy, who was about 13 months or so, a baby. And my sister said, you take care of the baby, because she didn't care for little babies, but I did. And I will wash the floor, because the lady had there soldiers, and she wanted we should wash the floor and take care of the baby. And she had a few noodles for him.

So she-- the lady took you into her house, as long as you did the work for her.

Yes. And she asked him if we can do anything. She said anything you want, they can do. She knew it. I didn't know it, but she knew it. So my sister started to wash the floor. I did the baby. But I never cooked. And when I put the noodles in, I didn't have it long enough. And when I gave it to him, he spit it out.

So I chewed it a little better. That was very hygienic. And then I put it in his mouth. And he ate it.

He ate it.

Yeah, but I first chewed it good, then I gave it to him, and he ate it. He was very good. And then some soldiers came, Russian. And they started that my sister is a German. And I heard it.

So I came out, and the baby was still having something coming out of his mouth. And I said, she's not German. She is Jewish. And we are both here. She's my sister. And it took me a while, and then they finally believed me. And then I see we have a Czech soldier.

I said, what is he doing here? And the Russians left. And when we asked the soldier, he said, you know, where you were, when you left, there were 16 Jews, and they all came out, and they were all 16 killed.

So the officer saw that we were between the 16. And he said, no, that he took us to Humenná and left us there with the lady. And that's why they send the soldier, to see if it's the truth. And it was. He took us there.

And then we decided-- my sister was sorry that she didn't get married. And we decided we'll go back to Prague. We couldn't have gone back to Prague because the war was still on. But we started to go back. And it was very, very hard to go back.

And then when we came to another place where we couldn't do nothing, my sister was asking the girls there if somebody saw the officer who wanted to marry her. He was 15 years older than she. And the soldier had told her he is somewhere, but he didn't know where.

So she was looking for him. She couldn't find him. And then, finally, she found him. And she got married. She wanted to get married before April 1.

Of 1945.

1945. And she got married. She didn't have really a wedding, but she got married. She went to the office, and she got married. And there was her friend, you know, who was the best man.

And on May the 9th, the war was over for the Czech Republic. And my brother-in-law was also an officer. And we were already in Prague. And the best man went home to where he was from. And he came back, and he asked me, would you

marry me? And I was 16. I said, of course.

I didn't want to go to school. And don't take it that's a good thing. But I really felt I don't have to get married. I mean, I have to get married, but I don't have to go to school.

I don't have to go to school, yeah.

So he said, no, you do have to go to school. And he said, where would you like to go? I said, wherever you go. He was the fourth year in medical school. And when we came to the school, he said, do you have something for a girl who never finished their high school to go to medical school? She said, you think this girl-- she never going learn anything.

And he said, she will. I'll be the teacher. And he was a very good teacher. I couldn't learn math at all. They were new math for me. And he said, that's all right, we'll get food when you finish with the math. And I learned as best as I could. And I went the whole year to medical school.

Erika, tell us-- you and your sister are now married. And he was the best-- your husband was the best man of the man that your sister married. Tell us about reuniting with your parents.

That was the nicest day we ever had. We didn't know where our parents are. Because we left them in the ghetto in Czernowitz. We never wrote or could do anything to know where they are.

But my father had three brothers in America. Because, you see, my grandparents had five sons. And they lost one son in the First World War. My father was really hit very badly, and he walked with a cane. And the three of them went to America.

The three other sons.

Went to America. So the two brothers weren't really very interested in us. But the one was very, very good. And he sent \$25 to everybody. So I got it. I was the only one who got it. And then we sent a telegram. And we found out that they were in Bucharest, in the capital of Bukovina. They were not in the ghetto.

When we got together with them, they didn't talk about the ghetto or anything. My father wanted to know-- were you nice to everyone? And my sister said, yes, we were. She knew. I didn't know if I was nice or I wasn't nice. But I tried to be nice to everyone.

Didn't your two husbands go get your--

Yes, we couldn't go nowhere because we didn't have any papers.

So they went to get your parents.

Yeah. And then-- oh, that was so bad. My sister wanted me to give her-- you know, that was later on, when she worked already. She gave her cross away. I didn't want to give my cross away. Because for me, it saved our life. And I didn't want to give it.

But she was the oldest. She bothered me so much. And I gave it to her. I didn't want to give her my cross, but I gave it. I had no choice. I gave her my cross.

And my parents, when we got together, that was such a wonderful, wonderful day that I can't even begin to tell you. No matter what my father wanted, nothing-- my sister said everything. We were so nice. And he said, was Erika nice too? She said, yes, she was.

And I think I was nice to everyone. It bothered me that I couldn't hate at least one person-- one people. But I, a matter of fact, have a friend, and I just got another card from her. She's very, very nice. She is German. And she invited us to the

60th birthday of her husband. And we went there with my husband. And they were so nice to us. They were really very nice. And I made her my friend just to show my father that I was nice to everyone.

Erika, in the little time that we have left-- of course, now you're living in Czechoslovakia.

Yeah.

And now it's under the Communist control.

Yes.

What was life like for you-- and you're married to a Czech officer.

Yeah.

What was life like for you under-- during that time?

It was very, very bad. Because I was so scared of the Russians, you have no idea. And when my late husband passed away, in 1959, I asked right away to go to the United States. Because my mother always said, we didn't see you, we would like you to come.

So your mother and-- your mother had made it to the United States?

Yeah, not my father. My father passed away two weeks later. So I wanted to go to the United States. And I got back that I could go any time, but they wouldn't let children go to a place which is not Communist and so on. And they wouldn't let.

And you had two children.

And I wouldn't leave them, not for a minute, not for a second. And I didn't go. And I never asked again. Then in 1960, I got a paper-- if I want to go with the children, I can go any time I want. And I didn't do nothing. One week passed by, two weeks passed by, three weeks passed by. And I was really scared that something was going to happen to me.

So I went to the general-- after he became president. And I showed them my paper. He said, three weeks you didn't do nothing? I said I was scared. But now I was scared that something is going to happen to me.

He said tomorrow, don't let the children go to school, and I will be with the children. I guarantee you, you'll be with the children. And that was good enough for me. He said, if you'll go somewhere, I don't know. But I guarantee you, you'll be with your children.

And wasn't there an association between your husband, who had passed away, and the general.

Yeah, he was the adjutant to the general.

To the general.

So he knew him very well. And always in the summer, the kids could go to a camp. He always saw to it. And then when I got the-- when I got the paper that I can go, I thanked him. And I left as fast as I could. And my children and I got \$29 to come to America. And I didn't have nothing more.

The people said, you can put it on-- I said, I don't want nothing. I had two children. I didn't want to get into trouble. I said, I have \$29. My daughter, at that time, was about 13. My son was eight. And my daughter said, you see, you and I, we are adults, but Mike is a kid. So he got \$9, and we got both \$10.

And Erika, am I right that you were the first to be legally allowed to leave Czechoslovakia under the Communists?

Yeah, I was. And when I left, I left with--