Wednesday, March 27, 2013

1:00-2:00 p.m.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: HALINA PEABODY

Held at:
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW
Washington, DC

(Remote CART)

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Welcome to United States Holocaust Memorial

First Person with Halina Peabody

Wednesday, March 27, 2013. . . . . .

>> Bill Benson: Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Thank you for joining us today. My name is Bill Benson, I am the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. We just began our 14th year of *First Person* last week. Our *First Person* today is Mrs. Halina Peabody, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2013 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.

Halina Peabody 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 towards the end of our program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask her a few questions.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Halina is one individual's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Halina Litman was born in Krakow, Poland, December 12, 1932. Poland is to the right of Germany on this map of Europe. The arrow on this map of Poland shows the location of Krakow.

Halina was the daughter of Ignacy and Olga Litman.

In this photograph, we see Halina, with her mother and her Aunt Irka taken in 1938.

Halina, her mother and sister survived the war in Jaroslav under false papers identifying the family as Catholics. On the way to Jaroslav, the family encounted a Polish man, who threatened to reveal their identity. Halina's mother struck a bargain with this man of using their tickets for the luggage, all the money she had and coats they were wearing, in trade for their survival.

Here we see Halina, her mother and her baby sister Eva.

This is the house where Halina and her family stayed in Jaroslav. In this photograph, Halina and her sister Eva celebrate Christmas in hiding.

Halina's mother decided the safest place to hide was in plain sight. She found a job at a German headquarters peeling potatoes for German troops. This is a photograph of Halina's mother with two Polish coworkers at the German headquarters where Olga worked. After the war, Halina and her family immigrated to England. Halina lives in Bethesda, Maryland. Her husband, Richard, passed away in 2011. She has two sons, one who lives in England, and the other just 10 minutes away. Halina has two granddaughters, Hannah, who is 16, and Olivia, 9. Hannah, who is producing a film about her grandmother for a school project is here today. If you don't mind, a little hand wave. Thank you.

Hannah frequently travels to England to see her son and her sister and her family. In April 2011, Halina and some of the other survivors from her hometown of Zaleszczyki in Poland, which is now in the Ukraine, went there to place a monument on an unmarked grave in which 800 Jews were buried during the first German action in that town. We will hear more about that a little later.

She continues her keen interest in sports, which have been a particular importance in her life, because her mother was the Polish swimming champion in 1925. Later this year, Halina will travel to Poland to visit an exhibit of Jewish athletes in Krakow. The exhibit includes her mother. She will also visit her family in England and Israel. Halina speaks frequently about her experience during the Holocaust at schools and here at the museum, as well as in other settings. Next week, she travels to Racine, Wisconsin, where she will speak at a community Holocaust Days of Remembrance sponsored by the Racine Public Library. Last month, she spoke at a high school as part of a Holocaust education program of Montgomery College in Maryland. Other upcoming talks include a school in Maclean, Virginia, and a home for the elderly in Maryland.

She will also participate in next month's Holocaust commemoration at Har Shalom Synagogue in Potomac, Maryland, where she will light one of six candles accompanied by her family. With that, I would like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mrs. Halina Peabody.

[Applause]

Welcome, Halina, and thank you so much for being willing to be with us today and be our *First Person*. We have so much to cover in such a short period, we should begin right away, I think.

>> Halina Peabody: Absolutely.

>> Bill Benson: You told me "Your life was beautiful" in the early years before war broke out in Poland in 1939. Let's start our conversation with you telling us a bit about your community, your family and yourself and those years before the war actually began.

>> Halina Peabody: I was very young, not quite 7 when the war broke out. My memory is rather childhood. I was the first child of my parents. I was the princess, so to speak. I had every bicycle and tricycle, and my mother was very all-around sports woman. I was skating freely at 5. I remember that. She was always teaching the girls there, the little children there to swim. We had a nice house. My father was a dentist. He had his surgery in the front of the house, and my mother tended to me and the little garden.

We had beautiful weather there. Zaleszczyki is in the easternmost part of Poland. Not anymore, but it used to be, and the river Dniester which is near Romania. You could go in a kayak, halfway through, but there were buoys there, and you couldn't go any further. But you could get a day pass to Romania and go over. It was very close, the relations were good. It was a very friendly frontier.

I had no worries. My father insisted on teaching me to read before I was going to school, because I was supposed to be a genius.

[Laughter]

But it stood me in good stead later on.

>> Bill Benson: Besides teaching you to read at 5, your parents taught you many other skills.

>> Halina Peabody: My mother was a wonderful knitter. She taught me to knit, crochet, embroider. She used to knit for my Shirley Temple doll.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us a bit more about your mother's athletic experience.

>> Halina Peabody: Well, my mother was a natural. When she started swimming, she immediately passed everybody else, even though she wasn't even swimming well. She very quickly became part of the team. Very early on, in her early teenage years she won the Polish championship. She broke records. She used to show me the statuette of gold she had for the championship, the four-leaf clover that we had, all gone, but she was wonderful. When she left Zaleszczyki, even though we were from Krakow, because there was water there, she could water ski there, and we'd go on the kayak. I had a little paddle, just for me. A wonderful, wonderful life up to that point, up to 1939.

>> Bill Benson: Of course, it all would change then. September 1939 Germany invaded Poland from the west. The Soviets then invaded Poland from the east. You lived in the part of Poland that fell under the Russian occupation.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. What happened was, we knew the Russians were coming. What I -- I don't remember exactly what I knew, but the people were very great panic, they were running around. A lot of men decided they didn't want to be conscripted. That's what the Russians did, they used to conscript the men into the Russian army, and you were 20 years in this kind of prison. You couldn't leave.

So a lot of men -- also they thought about World War I where they did that to the men. They didn't think of women and children being in any danger. I didn't mention that my sister was born two months before the war. So there was a baby in the house.

My father decided he should run over to Romania with some others, and they just went over the bridge to Romania. A lot of people with him did.

Unfortunately, then, the Russians came in, and they did a lot of bad things, as I understand it. The people, however, that went over decided after a while that things have settled down, and perhaps it would be OK to come back to the families and the businesses that they left.

So they decided to quietly cross back over. By then, the river was completely frozen over. Took a white sheet, they tried to cross quietly back. Unfortunately, the Russians by then sealed the border. They were all arrested.

They were tried for being spies, because they went over and came back. My father ended up in a prison, then was sent to Siberia, to a place -- we as the family of a criminal, quote unquote, were supposed to go to Russia. As I said, the criminals and families were also sent to Siberia. For some reason, that I still don't know what it was, they didn't take us. We were all ready to go. However, they threw us out of our house, because we were not allowed to have a house.

I know we moved to a little place called time-out, with a town -- called Touste up the road. We had to leave. We had a little room, I remember. That picture is the only picture of my sister as a little child, that my mother was there. That was in the winter. That's where we were, until very shortly afterwards, the Germans decided that --

>> Bill Benson: Let me ask you a couple questions before we go there. When your father was then sent to Siberia, arrested and sent to Siberia, did your mother know what had happened to him? Did she hear from him in any way?

>> Halina Peabody: We didn't hear for quite a while. He was completely incommunicado for a while. Then we got a letter that he was in the gulag there. Before the Germans took over, we had a few letters back and forth.

>> Bill Benson: Once the Germans took over, that was the end of that?

>> Halina Peabody: The communication was over.

>> Bill Benson: Were any other relatives sent to Siberia?

>> Halina Peabody: Yes, my aunt, uncle and cousin. The other aunt and uncle, who were supposed to be taken as well, they for some reason left and they ended up in Auschwitz.

>> Bill Benson: They weren't taken by the Russians?

>> Halina Peabody: They were not, later on.

>> Bill Benson: You were about 8 1/2 when the Nazis turned on the Russians, and the Germans came into the area of Poland where you were.

>> Halina Peabody: And we came back to our house then.

>> Bill Benson: Of course, then things turned dramatically worse. Tell us what happened.

>> Halina Peabody: Well, when the Germans came, we came back to our house, when the Germans occupied the rest of Poland they put all kinds of rules. Everybody was very anxious to cooperate. We were very, very terrified. This was another occupation, not knowing what they expected from us. As the Russians did, they demanded gold, silver, anything of value we had to give in.

They had everybody working for them. Every Jewish person had to be working for them, to the point where if there was no particular job for them, they made them clean the roads.

A lot of times they would take groups of young people to work in the field. They would just ask for the number of so-and-so, they would take them and come back.

They created -- excuse me. They created Judenrat. Judenrat was a Jewish committee. They took the leaders of the Jewish community of the town and they worked through them. So if they had demands for whatever they had demands, they would ask through the committee, and the

committee was told to supply whatever was necessary.

As I said, we went back to our house, so my mother tried to look after my sister as best she could, and me. Kept my writing up. Then they knew she was a good knitter, so they had her knit for the mayor of town. Of course, a German man who had lots of children. Her job was to knit for the mayor's children.

Everybody, as I said, was very cooperative. They, of course, put yellow stars on the houses, yellow bands on our hands. No school for Jewish children. As I said, we just sat there and tried to do whatever we could. Very, very scared, not knowing, not knowing what. There was nowhere to run. We just waited to see what would happen next. We hoped just by cooperating things wouldn't be too bad. Everybody was willing to do what was necessary.

We waited always for the people, went to work, came back. Then the SS came in, all in black uniforms and gold buttons, very, very scary, came roaring down the road on bicycles --

>> Bill Benson: Motorcycles?

>> Halina Peabody: Motorcycles, yes. Great noise. We just stayed quiet, didn't know what else was coming.

What they did was instill a lot of fear in us. We were absolutely terrified. They start doing things like catching Jewish people that had beards,

and that was their religions part of their -- religious part, the religious people had lots of beards. They would catch a person in the street. There were lots of screams, yells. They would tear off their hair and do things like that. I remember one time I was standing in front of my house, and my mother pulled me away. Those are the kind of images that I remembered.

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me an incident that took place pretty quickly where a large group of young men and women were rounded up. Tell us about that.

>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. Well, at this point they had this demand for a big group of young people. They said they wanted as many as they could to come to the square where they would gather, and they would walk up the road. There was an old Polish military camp. The winters were very, very fierce there. Very, very severe. Sometimes for the winter they would wrap up the trunks of the trees with burlap. That's what they said that they needed to have done, because they were up there in the military camp and there was nobody there, but they needed to wrap those trees.

So a lot of people came, over the number apparently even requested. Everybody wanted to help. A lot of volunteers. They all came.

They were marched up the road, and we waited for them to come back in the evening. And nobody was coming back. So people were getting a little nervous. Waited and waited. Family members, nothing.

Eventually, towards the evening, one man dragged himself in and back to his family, and he told us what happened. What he said was that when they got there, there was a grave, a communal grave. There were planks of wood over the grave, and they were told to take off the clothes and lay down on the planks, and they were shot. As they were shot, they dropped into the grave.

He was the last one to be done. He was one of the last group that was shot, and he -- apparently they missed his heart, they just hit his arm, and they didn't cover them very much with the earth, because there was no need to. A little bit over the top. He managed to drag himself out, and he came home, and that's what he reported.

We then understood what happened. Over 800 people. As I mentioned to Bill, we always were aware of this horrific memory, that I thought there was not a sign of but this grave. We were back in Zaleszczyki, and they didn't know about it even.

Through the museums, I tracked down a few people from this hometown of mine. As I said, I didn't remember any names, but I saw two sisters from Zaleszczyki, and I managed to track them down. There was quite -- it was about five, six of us apparently in New York, in Montreal.

We got together. We got a monument. This lady who lives in Montreal went back there and she arranged with the town to put the

monument on it. We traveled April 2011 and put a monument. We had a cantor there, and we prayed, prayed for them. That was one of my goals that I wanted to put some kind of a memory mark there. So that was the first time we heard about this, what happened to people when they took them away.

Then we settled back, we wanted to know what the next thing is going to be, the next shoe to drop. Not very soon afterwards, they again -- this time the demand was for a number of people. They had exact numbers. Because they were going to take them for work in Germany.

Of course, by then, everybody was running and trying to hide. My mother took my sister and me over, I know, to a lady that used to cook for us, across the street, and we were going to stay with her for the day. And we waited there all day.

They had an easy job, because all of the houses were marked with yellow stars, they knew where to find them. They got the right number. They loaded them on the train, supposedly for work in Germany. Never heard from them again, either.

As we went back, we realized that it was really a situation that was horrendous. My mother with the two children, nowhere to run.

We wanted to know what is going to be next. What they did next, they didn't want to have the trouble to look for people and to drag them out of the houses, because after they had those two actions, there were not that many

Jews left. So they threw us out of the town altogether to the same place that we were during the Russians, Touste. They also brought people from the communities around that did the same thing. Whatever was left, they put us together again into Touste.

There, everybody first, what they wanted to do was look for hiding places, because we knew the next step would be, again, they were going to try to get us out.

So I know my mother said to me there's not much point in doing that, because as soon as they get us into a smaller group, they'll move us again. So we will lose. This is a no-win situation.

She was trying desperately to have at least the children taken over to Romania, all sorts of things, but nothing worked.

>> Bill Benson: She put in motion a plan at one point --

>> Halina Peabody: Not at this point. She tried to get us over --

>> Bill Benson: That's what I mean. Apart from her?

>> Halina Peabody: That's right, without her. Yes. I didn't want to go. Anyway, at this point the man came again for a group of people to be in the square to go for work in Germany, and at this point you see my mother, because she had some connections there, she knew two farmers. She decided to hide with the farmers.

A lot of people went underneath the houses. A lot of people had little

hiding places marked for them. So everybody went into hiding.

I was placed with a farmer up in the loft. I was left there. My mother made a deal with another farmer and took my sister. She was going to stay with that farmer for the day. As the day went on, the lady that had me kept coming back and telling me that this one was seen in the square, that one was seen in the square. I was convinced my mother was caught. All day long I thought my God, my mother was caught.

Toward the end of the day finally, she came with my sister and told me what happened with her, which was that her farmer was scared. In the middle of the day she got scared, because it was a high penalty for keeping Jewish people. And she threw her out. She just threw her out with my sister into an empty field.

Now, that empty field was flat, and it had just a little bush there, she told me. She was hiding under this little bush with my sister. She was crouching there for the rest of the day. She said how they didn't see her is a miracle, because they were circling with airplanes, looking for stragglers. Somehow, by miracle, they didn't see her.

She was always worried about me. Now, she was worried also that I was caught. So we were both in a state of great anxiety.

When we came together, she said she made up her mind that we were not going to separate again. Whatever happens to us, we'll go

together. That's the way it was going to be, whatever happens we'll be together, we're not going to be apart.

She was worried mainly for the children. I knew she didn't care about herself, because she knew what was happening in the concentration camps, that the children didn't survive at all.

So she, with the help of her friend, started thinking again of finding a way. What they came up with, because we were three girls, she managed to obtain false identities of Catholics. We were going to just leave there, escape from there into a town where nobody knew us.

That's what the friends helped her, we managed to get onto a train in Jaroslav -- I'm sorry, in Touste. This was going to be a trip to a place called Jaroslav. I had no idea why that town, but it was on the way to Krakow. The town was already without any Jews there. We just hoped nobody would recognize us, you know. I was blonde, real blonde, and I had green eyes, so I didn't look Jewish.

We didn't speak Yiddish. Our accents were very Polish. My mother thought we had maybe a chance.

So we said good-bye to our friends, none of whom survived, unfortunately. We boarded the train and started our trip. This was going to be four days and four-night trip. In olden days it took a long time. It was wartime. We knew we had to change in places. Anyway, the friends

collected little money for her. We had two suitcases left of all, everything that we ever had. That's how we started our trip to Jaroslav.

As we were traveling, a young man attached himself to us, started chatting us up, talking about the children and my mother. Slowly, slowly he started pushing, asking if there was anybody Jewish in the family, maybe the father, grandfather. It was enough if it was great-great-great grandfather was Jewish, you were still Jewish. Didn't have much chance.

Slowly, slowly he wore my mother down, and you can imagine a mother with two kids, terrified, not knowing where we're going, what to do.

She said to me finally, you know, I could not resist anymore. I couldn't withstand the pressure, and I told him, yes, indeed, we are Jewish. At which point, he said, well, you know, I have to take you to the gestapo. And I'm going to Jaroslav as well, so I will look after you.

He did, he looked after us very carefully. He was very sure to have even my sister or me in his sights. But we had nowhere to run. We weren't going to run anyway.

As we were traveling, then my mother started again thinking of something. She didn't know what, but she wanted to do something. She knew we didn't have any way to escape.

The main thing with her was not to be separated from the children. She did not want the children to be taken away from her.

So she started speaking with him, and she said, "Look, I will give you the receipts for my two suitcases and all the money I have." Even she promised the coats we had on our backs. She said "I just want you to do one thing for me. When we get to the gestapo, could you have us shot immediately, all three of us, because I don't want to be separated from my children, I don't want the children to suffer."

He promised he would. So that's how we traveled, four days, four nights. We were absolutely exhausted as you can imagine. Whilst we were traveling, I wasn't thinking hard, but we neared Jaroslav and I started worrying a little bit. I was afraid of dying, as anybody would, even a small child would.

My sister was completely unaware of all this. She was very young, like 2 years old, 2 1/2. We didn't tell her anything. For me, it started being a big deal. I got scared and didn't want to die.

As we got off the train, we started walking towards gestapo, and I started pulling at my mother saying "Mom, mom, I don't want to die." My poor mom looked at him and said "Look, why don't you let her go? She's blonde and she could probably get away with it, maybe she will survive."

I said "No, I don't want to go by myself. I want you and my sister to come too" obviously.

So as we're walking, she says to him, "Do you have children of your

own?"

He said "Yes."

She said "Look, I've given you everything I have. Why do you want us on your conscience? Just let us go and try our luck."

And something touched him, and he thought about it, and he said "You don't have a chance," he said, but he left us.

So he left us in the middle of the town, strange town, didn't know, the main road, left us. There we were. We had nothing. He took everything with him, of course. We were just three of us.

>> Bill Benson: You have nothing but your, at least now still alive --

>> Halina Peabody: We have our lives. Yes, yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us, Halina, before you tell us how you started your new life in Jaroslav, you are just 8 1/2, 9 years old, and you are now having to be somebody that you're not, with a whole new identity, new religion. What do you recall of the difficulty of that, of being so prepared that you wouldn't get tripped up by somebody like another person like this man asking probing questions to figure out who you really are?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, I didn't know much, but I was a kid. I knew I had to cross myself going in the church, with the right hand, and coming out. At that age, didn't know much more.

>> Bill Benson: You had to have a different name?

>> Halina Peabody: Oh, yes. That was the first thing, my mother sat me down, gave me all of the new details. A new name, new birth date, new grandparents, different area, everything, yes. I knew, I was aware. Fear will keep you straight. I was pretty well-trained by my mother anyway.

I had all of the details, and the trouble was with the papers that we never knew whether they were good or not. My mother was always worried about that. To this day, I don't know, because I gave them to the Holocaust Museum. I don't know if the papers were real or not. They were sold to us by a priest, that's all I know. There were stamps. Those days there were no computers. Thank goodness now. It was better not to be checked. That was one of my mother's problems, because when we were left in the town, she needed to find a place to stay so we wouldn't be on the street, because the Germans were just walking around with the gun at the side, it was very easy. Life was very cheap.

We walked into a little cafe where my mother started asking if they knew of somebody who could take lodgers in. A young man got up, said he knew of a washer lady. He said he would walk us to her, which he did. The lady saw mother and two children, of course in a terrible, exhausted condition. She said she'll take us in.

Her sons were very much against it, but she said -- she was a real Christian, I say always. A mother and two children, she said I have to help.

What we got was a bed. That's all we needed. My mother told her we have no money, but that next day she would go to find a job, and she would -- whatever she earns she would bring, and for keeping us. That's exactly what she did.

She did the housekeeping job. You had to steal a little food here and there. That was the way during the war. She did change this job a couple of times.

My sister was very sickly. She was very worried about my sister because she really was sick. She was also worried about my sister's hair, because my sister's hair is completely like an afro, very, very curly. In Poland, the Polish girls have straight, blonde hair. Mine was wavy, so it wasn't so bad, but she was really an afro.

What she did, under the pretext she needs to make them thicker, she shaved her head a couple of times because she was so worried.

There was school for Polish kids for one -- for two hours a day. One hour for religion, one hour for the other things. That's where it helped me, because I learned the catechism from A to Z very quickly, because I could read. That was the way they taught religion at the time. I think it's changed now.

We went to church on Sundays, which was lovely. Mass was said in Latin. It was a kind of nice place to be, and it was warm, the incense was

lovely and the lights. It was the only place actually that felt a little more safe, somehow.

I was sent over to the neighbor to help, apparently this neighbor was somehow partly German, so he had the right to have a laborer for free, so I was sent to help him in the kitchen. So my mother always thought it was good to be working.

The Germans, all they wanted to know is that everybody was working for them. That was the main thing.

During that time, we had one letter from our friends, who before they perished. And that letter was through the Red Cross, that came to us, which they forwarded, which told us that my father was safe with his sister in Palestine.

Now, we knew there was a part of the family that immigrated to Palestine, now Israel, in the 1930s, 1932, I think. And that was my father's sister with her four children. But we never met them. We didn't even know which town. But the fact that he was out of Russia, which was so important, because he was a prisoner for 20 years hard labor, so the fact that he was out gave us some hope and something to hang on to during this terrible time.

We had very little information what was going on in the front, anything like that. No radios, no papers.

>> Bill Benson: This woman that you described was kindly, who took you into her home, you had a place to stay. She had some sons that were a different story.

>> Halina Peabody: Correct, yes. One of her sons, the youngest one, did something that was a death penalty as well. He killed pigs for a living.

>> Bill Benson: Clandestinely?

>> Halina Peabody: Of course. The Poles were not allowed to have meat either. We were always afraid they'd come around and look for him. They were always looking for him, never found him. She had four sons.

>> Bill Benson: The Germans came by?

>> Halina Peabody: Yes, later. We had something else in common. In the meantime, my mother was always trying to think of a surer way, better way. As I said, she decided that maybe it would be good to hide in plain sight. If she could work for a German military camp up the road, she would have an idea like that. If she was stopped in the street, if she showed them the ID working for the Germans, they would let you go. Otherwise, they might inquire papers, this, that, or the other. This way, she felt, would be a little safer, because she was forever thinking of security. She was worried my sister was playing in the street with curly hair, everything was scary.

So she applied to the German military camp for work. Then she told her they have to check the papers, so again we lived in fear for weeks. I

don't know if they ever checked it. Who knows? That far back.

Anyway, after about eight weeks, she got the permit and started working as you saw. She was working in the kitchen peeling potatoes with some other people. That was her job. She had the Ausweiss, she had the ID. At that point, it became very important, because one night the Germans decided to look for the son again, and came great noise and screams. They usually came like that in the middle of the night.

Open the door, they came in, they checked, and they took everybody in, and they said they were looking for him. Of course, he wasn't there. They were going to take everybody into the station to check them out. But then my mother got up and showed the ID. He said "No, you stay."

So the only Jews in the place stayed.

[Laughter]

The others were just checked out and brought, came back the next day, because they were all employed, working one way or the other. That was the kind of thing that you had to always be watchful.

>> Bill Benson: Your mother, when you described her, what she did, the courage that that took, to not only have a hidden identity, but to go right into the den of the enemy, right into their camp and work. Must have been just terrifying.

>> Halina Peabody: She used to come with all sorts of stories. At one point, she came, she said one of the officers came in with a dog, and he said that this dog has been trained to smell out Jews. She said look, I know this is impossible, but what if this dog takes fancy to me?

[Laughter]

That kind of stuff. It's amazing what -- you know. But she felt she got a little more secure by having this ID. That's how we lived, you know. I went to school, for the two hours, as I said. The lady who looked after us, the hostess, was very nice, and she wanted very much -- she was a real, as I said, a real Christian. She wanted to save my soul, particularly me.

My mother was too old. My sister was too young. But I was there.

>> Bill Benson: You were just right?

>> Halina Peabody: I was just right. She sent me for a lesson in communion, and I have a picture going to communion.

I was OK. My mother always said, she kept me straight, she said "We all pray to the same God. So it doesn't matter what religion" you know. She said "But if you're born Jewish, you may as well stay Jewish."

>> Bill Benson: Halina, you would continue under these circumstances, living in Jaroslav to the end of the war. As the Russians were advancing, of course, there were battles taking place in Jaroslav. There you were living in that house. Tell us what happened.

>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. Well, one morning we woke up, since we were on the main road there was the clapping of horses and carts. We kids used to go and steal food from them sometimes. They were always going back and forth, but at this point, this morning, it was completely quiet. It was a deathly silence. We didn't know what was happening.

My mother was still talking about maybe she should get up to go to work, she didn't know. I was standing by the window, by the bed. She was in bed with my sister. Suddenly, there was a tremendous bang, and a bomb fell on us.

I started screaming "My hand! My hand!"

My mother got up, grabbed me. The kitchen was down, I mean, the roof fell down. My mother grabbed me by the other hand, we walked into the street. The hospital was about a block and a half away. She carried my sister, so she couldn't carry me. But my hand was bleeding badly.

We managed to get to the hospital. She -- they picked me up there, and they cleaned me up. They told my mother that my hand is very dirty, there was no penicillin. They were going to have to probably amputate.

My mother was -- I can't even -- well, any mother, any parent can know what she was thinking. I was hospitalized, of course. My mother stayed the night with my sister. The next morning she went back to the place. It was unlivable already. A neighbor took her in. Apparently, the lady,

our hostess, was underneath, she was in the kitchen and she was killed by the roof falling down, so she passed away. And my mother was taken by the neighbor.

In the meantime, the nurses there were nuns, very lovely ladies, always in white, very beautiful ladies, little blonde hair coming out I remember. They took care of me. She saved my hand -- they saved my hand. They simply had to do a lot of burning out the stuff, because it was all open wound. So they had to cauterize it a lot.

>> Bill Benson: You mentioned no penicillin for infection, nor pain medications.

>> Halina Peabody: Right. Well, the pain was the cauterizing.

>> Bill Benson: Right.

>> Halina Peabody: The nun would tell me to scream. She would say "Put your hand in my habit and scream." My poor mother used to run for miles just not to hear it.

>> Bill Benson: The day that that happened, essentially, was the end of the war for that part of Poland. It was over, you were injured on that last day?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, yes, that's right. The Russians came in. My mother said they were going to stay, too. She knew.

>> Bill Benson: Now you're under the Russians again?

>> Halina Peabody: Now we're under the Russians. My mother is trying hard to think of how to get to find my father. She started knitting a little bit to earn a little money, and we were with the neighbor.

I was in the hospital for about two months. I wanted to say who I was immediately, but my mother told me that I can't, because, unfortunately, there was a pogrom by the Poles.

I'm not saying all of the Poles are bad, but that was my experience. A few people that came out of hiding were killed by the Poles. I had to keep the pretense of being a Catholic. So that's what I did.

In the meantime, I think the stress on my mother was so great that she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and the doctor urged us to have the operation, because he didn't want us to be orphans. My mother had to go through that. In the meantime, she was writing to wherever she could, and luckily for us the radio station in Tel Aviv recognized the names. There was a lady there, so we got in touch with my father.

My father sent a cousin of mine, who was in the British army, and he came to put us in touch with the Jewish agency. We had to move closer to Krakow. Again, we had to keep our pretense, because we were asked if we wanted lodging. "Are you really Polish?"
Meaning are you Jewish? We had to keep the pretense up, until we got into the main kind of group of people being taken over to Germany.

What they did, they put you in a sort of communal home, then you were taken by lories, trucks they're called here, took you about a kilometer or two past the frontier between Poland and Germany, and you took a train to Berlin.

We missed my father twice, but finally we did make contact.

>> Bill Benson: Wasn't there one point, Halina, in a tremendously bitter irony --

>> Halina Peabody: Oh, yes.

>> Bill Benson: You know where I'm going.

>> Halina Peabody: Whilst in this communal home at one point, they accused us of trying to pretend to be Jewish because we wanted to get out of Poland.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: It was hard to prove that was the case?

>> Halina Peabody: My mother said my husband's name was Isaac. People signed up for it. That was real irony, yes. That was, yes.

So we managed -- the frontier was a Polish guard, and a Russian guard, because there was some agreement that the Jews can be sort of taken out of Poland, if they wanted to.

So they had some problems, they had to take some extra watches to get through. Then at the German station, they refused to sell us tickets because we were Jews. That was already after they lost the war. But eventually, we managed to get to Berlin, and I got white bread and cheese.

Slowly, slowly we ended up in Italy for a couple of months, where my father caught up with us. We then had the choice, because my father when

he left Russia was in a Polish unit which became part of the British unit. He was actually stationed in Egypt.

>> Bill Benson: As part of the British army?

>> Halina Peabody: British, yeah. We didn't have to wait for visas. We had the right to go either to Palestine or to England. My parents chose England, so we ended up going to England, where I went to school and my mother refused to put me in the Polish school where I wanted to go, because I knew Polish so well, and English I didn't know. But she insisted. She said "If you're living now in England, you got to learn English."

>> Bill Benson: When you finally reunited with your father, what was that like?

>> Halina Peabody: Difficult. Yeah. I was my mother's partner all these years, and suddenly I was a child, so it was not easy. It was a loss of something there, but it wasn't easy.

>> Bill Benson: If you don't mind, I'm going to turn to our audience for a few questions in a moment. I have one I'd like -- something I'd like you to talk about. With your injury to your hand, of course, once you got established and you were living in England, you don't mind me saying you were very self-conscious about your injury.

>> Halina Peabody: Of course.

>> Bill Benson: You took up table tennis.

>> Halina Peabody: That's right.

>> Bill Benson: Say a little about that.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. I actually wanted tennis, but tennis was impossible because there were no facilities really. But table tennis was available everywhere. I was in college, and then where we bought the house in London was club Maccabi, the Jewish youth club all over the world. It was right around the corner. I would go there every evening and play to my heart's content.

We had a team, we went around England. I got kind of a little better and better.

>> Bill Benson: You became a champion.

>> Halina Peabody: The boys coached me, yes. In Israel they have Maccabiah games every four years. They're like the Olympics, but only for Jewish youth from all over the world. In 1953, when the Maccabiah came along, I was lucky to be chosen to go to represent England in Israel.

It was the most wonderful trip to Israel. I met my family. I also have some friends there from before the war, which was too far before to meet them, but I got to meet everybody. I was wined and dined, I didn't want to come home, but of course my mother was waiting, so I came back.

Unfortunately, my mother passed away in 1956. In 1957, the next Maccabiah, I came back again, went back again with the table tennis, and I

decided to stay for a year. It was too nice not to share, so I brought my sister over. So she came for a year and she met her future husband there, also an English fellow. I stayed 11 years, working at the American embassy in Tel Aviv. That's how I got to the United States.

We came for a year in 1968.

>> Bill Benson: Your mother must have been so proud of you, that you became a sports champion just like she had been.

>> Halina Peabody: She was. She was. She was terrific, yes. She wanted everybody to be into sports, and now we have the same thing going in our family. We have basketball.

>> Bill Benson: Star center, exactly right.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Halina, let's turn to our audience and see if they have questions. We have a few minutes. If you could make your question as brief as you can, and we hope to be able to use mics, the hand mics if we can get them to you. That will help a lot.

>> Hello. Could you describe how your mother got the papers that said you were Catholic?

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. They bought it from a priest. I said purchased it, because he didn't give them to us, but he made those. A lot of people did. So we're not the only ones. But this was a good business.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: We have a question right here, about 2/3rds of the way back in the middle.

>> Hi. Do you know what any of the letters that your father sent contained, information about what was happening after he was taken away to Russia, to be a prisoner, that he had sent -- you had some communication with him before things got -- it was back in the beginning.

>> Halina Peabody: We exchanged a few letters --

>> Bill Benson: She's asking if you know what was in his letters. What was he writing about?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, he was writing about the fact that his conditions were not the worst, because he being a dentist and there was no medical people in that camp, he was made into a sort of medic. So that's what he said.

I remember we sent him a package of a pillow and some food. But he was incarcerated for 20 years. Officially.

>> Bill Benson: That was his sentence, right?

>> Halina Peabody: That was his sentence, yes.

>> Bill Benson: We have another question. Young man right here. Yes, sir? We'll bring you the mic.

>> When your father fled before the Soviet occupation, did he have intentions

of figuring out a way of getting yourself and your mother and sister out, or was that just to avoid --

>> Halina Peabody: Well, some people did take families with them. As I said, he was worried about my sister because she was a baby, my mother was breast feeding her. He was worried it was too much. Rather than stay over, he decided to come back. That's when he was caught. It would have been better if we had all gone over. But that was what happened.

>> Bill Benson: As I think you explained at the time, there was that, initially a sense that only the men had to be fearful anyway.

>> Halina Peabody: That's right. That's right. That's correct. It was true except they didn't know the rest of the plan, yeah.

>> How old were you when you reunited with your father?

>> Halina Peabody: I was close to 14. A lifetime.

>> Bill Benson: That's a lot of years.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: A question back here?

>> Thank you very much. Was your family ever reimbursed for the loss of your home or any of your previous belongings before you were taken away?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, the Germans did make some restitution, but how do you pay for these things? Of course not. Yeah. When we went back to Zaleszczyki, this is now Ukraine, they said we don't have the money to pay,

plus our house was destroyed.

Now, for my wounded hand they did give me sort of like Social Security. That's all, you know. There's no money that you can really reimburse people, but they did try to do something. They tried to repay something to give us some feeling that they're sorry for what they've done. But it's not the compensation, it just never leaves you. This is we ask God for life, but we are pleased and happy to have a family.

I always say this is our revenge on Hitler.

>> Bill Benson: Halina, besides your immediate family, your sister, your mother, your father, did any other relatives survive?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, my aunt survived in Russia, and she and my cousin and uncle were coming through. My uncle died on the way, but my cousin and my aunt came over. My cousin became a doctor in England, very successful. And my aunt lived until a good age in England. Yes. The others, no grandparents, cousins, no, the rest, no. No.

>> Bill Benson: We're going to close in just a moment. I'm going to turn back to Halina to close our program. I want to thank all of you for being with us today. Thank you very much. Remind you that we will have a *First Person* program every Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. So hope you can come back sometime.

It is our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last

word. So I'm going to turn back to Halina to close the program. When she's

done, she'll step off the stage. If you want to ask her some more questions

or just say hi, please absolutely feel free to do that. Halina?
>> Halina Peabody: I just have a little thing here. I just wanted to say that by bearing witness of terrifying experiences we Holocaust survivors tried to alert future generations that to prevent such tragedies in the future we can never stop working toward making this a more humane and peaceful world. That's it.
[Applause]
>> Bill Benson: Thank you.