Thursday, March 28, 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

Thursday, March 28, 2013. . . . . .

>> Bill Benson: Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson, and I am the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us. We just began our 14th year of *First Person* this past week. Our *First Person* today is Mrs. Halina Peabody, whom you 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 experiences during the Holocaust. Each guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue through 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, toward the end of the program, we'll have an opportunity for you

to ask a few questions of Halina.

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, on 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 Aunt Irka taken in 1938.

Halina, her mother and sister survived the war in Jaroslav under false papers identifying the family as Catholics.

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

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 and two Polish co-workers 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 of whom lives in England, the other just 10 minutes away, as Halina notes. Halina has two granddaughters. Hannah, 16, and Olivia, 9. I might mention Hannah is studying film producing and is producing a film about Halina at this very moment.

Halina 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 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're going to hear about that a little bit 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 and other settings. Next week, she will travel to Racine, Wisconsin, where she speaks at a 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 at Montgomery College in Montgomery County, 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'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mrs. Halina Peabody.

[Applause]

Halina, thank you so much for joining us today, being our *First Person*. We're really glad to have you here with us.

We have so much for you to cover in a short period, so we'll just get started right away. You told me when we first met, in your early years before war broke out that life was beautiful for you. When war began, of course, it all changed, in September 1939. Let's start with you telling us about the prewar years, about your family, your community, your life before the war began.

>> Halina Peabody: We lived in a very lovely little place called Zaleszczyki, which was a seaside, not actually a riverside town. That town is almost completely surrounded by the river Dniester. In 1939, it was a national

frontier with Romania. Since my mother was a swimming champion, she loved the water. She used to water ski there. We used to go paddling around in canoes. It was a lovely, lovely place to be in.

In the wintertime, it was very, very cold, though, and so we used to do winter sports. My mother was also a skier and could dance on skates. She did everything. By the age of 5, I already skated. Really, I remember.

So this was -- she did a lot that way. Also, my father taught me to read before the war, before I went to school. Being the first, he wanted me to be the genius. He insisted I should read the newspaper.

I don't remember anything of that. As long as I can remember, I could always read Polish, and write. So this was something that I am not aware of.

My mother, on the other hand, was also a wonderful knitter and used to do wonderful lace. Everything at home was made by her. She was teaching me embroidery. I remember embroidering a little handkerchief for my grandmother in Krakow.

And we had bicycles, tricycles, we had everything that was available.

Then, as I said, life was beautiful. My father was a dentist. He practiced, surgery, in the front of the house. We had a house. In the back, we lived. All my mother's work was me. She looked after me. She used to knit for my Shirley Temple doll. That I remember. That was beautiful. That all came to an end suddenly in 1939.

>> Bill Benson: Halina, did you have a large extended family?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, yes. We had quite a large extended family, but they were all in Krakow, in Warsaw. We were the only ones in Zaleszczyki. That was the reason, my father was a young starting dentist, wanted to find a place to start anew there.

>> Bill Benson: Germany invades Poland September 1, 1939. Soon after, the Russians, in their agreement with Germany, attack Poland.

>> Halina Peabody: We knew in 1939, September, when we knew that the bells went off, that it was the Russians we were expecting. Because men were very afraid of being conscripted into the Russian army, which was 20 years, they couldn't get out. They based themselves on the first world war. A lot of them wanted to run away.

We had really nowhere to go, and the problem was always that my sister was born two months before the war. So we had a baby at home.

A lot of people just grabbed whatever they could and ran the bridge to Romania. My father felt it was better that we stay at home. So he went over by himself, and with lots of other people, and we stayed alone.

>> Bill Benson: There was the belief, part of that was, because they thought only men would be at risk.

>> Halina Peabody: That's right.

>> Bill Benson: You'd be safe?

>> Halina Peabody: That's what he thought. He didn't think we were in any danger. When the Russians occupied us, we just carried on as we were, mother and two children. After two, three weeks, I don't know how many weeks it was, but everything was frozen over, and people who ran to Romania and left families and businesses decided that perhaps they could come back, that maybe it wasn't going to be so terrible.

So my father, along with a few others, tried to sneak in, back over the ice, the river, which was completely frozen. They tried to sneak back into Poland.

At that point, the Russians had sealed the border, and they got arrested. The Russians put them on trial, as spies, because they were going there, coming back, and my father got 20 years hard labor and was sent to Siberia.

We, on the other hand, his family, was supposed to be also taken to Siberia like that. We were all packed, ready to go, because as families of a criminal, quote unquote, we needed to be also going to Siberia. But for some reason, I don't know to this day, we didn't, they didn't take us. But they threw us out of our house, and we had to move away and to a small town called Touste, which was a few kilometers up the road.

>> Bill Benson: With your father taken to Siberia, do you know if your mother knew what happened to him, where he went, and did she hear from him?

>> Halina Peabody: Yes, after quite a few months, we got a letter that he was in a prison, a hard labor place. His conditions weren't as bad as the others. Being the only medical person, they didn't have any doctors, so he was -- as a dentist, he was made the medical person there. He had some better conditions there.

I know we had letters going back and forth. We sent a package or two. But then, of course, it didn't take long before the Germans decided that they would break the agreement, and they came right to the rest of Poland.

>> Bill Benson: You are now about 8 1/2 when the Germans came into your area and took over from the Soviets.

>> Halina Peabody: Right.

>> Bill Benson: That changed things dramatically, quickly. Tell us what happened once --

>> Halina Peabody: First, we did come back to our house, we reoccupied our house, and waited to see, very frightened, what these occupiers are going to do. They were German. The mayor decided everybody had to be working, especially the Jews. Every Jew had to be working, doing something for the Germans. If there was not enough work, they were told to clean the streets.

Also, they made very difficult life for everybody, because they went around and they accosted people, like if there was a Jewish person with a

beard, a lot of hair, they would stop them in the street and yell and scream and take the hair off. Things like that were happening.

We were told that we have to give up, of course, any silver, gold, money or whatever of value. We were not allowed to have anything.

We were told to put a yellow star on the house, and a yellow armband.

No school for Jewish children at all. Mother tried to keep up as best she could my writing skills. We just waited, what will happen next? We just hoped by cooperating things would not be so terrible.

My mother, though she had a baby, was told she, because they knew she was a good knitter, would be knitting for the mayor of the town's children. He had lots of children. So she did that. That was her job.

All in all, they were just putting all kinds of curfews and we were not -- of course, no meat allowed. There were rations. We were not allowed to go to certain places. Everything was very scary.

I just remember being terrified. Again, we just didn't know what was going on, what the -- didn't know what the plan was.

They used to demand groups of people to go on various jobs outside of town. They created a committee of Jewish leaders in that little town, and they would make their demands through those committees.

If they needed 100 people to go to some job, they would tell them, and they would have to tell us to go and be there, and it had to be the right

number. The Germans were very keen on numbers.

As I said, everybody was cooperating. Then the SS arrived. The SS, this was the -- now, the black uniforms arrived, with the gold buttons, on motorcycles, roaring down the street. Everybody was just hiding, trying not to be visible, because we got so terrified of them.

They just came to do other things, obviously.

We didn't have long to wait. They had demanded a group of people to be in the square in the morning, and they said that they wanted them to bind trees for the winter in a camp, just a little military camp just up the road. Because the winters were so harsh, sometimes they would put burlap over the trunks of the trees.

So nobody was suspicious that anything was going to go wrong, and the whole group, some volunteers, a lot of people came to the square, and they were marched up the road to do the work.

As the rest of us were sitting and waiting for them to come back, as usual, all day long we waited and nobody came back. Until late in the evening somebody dragged himself in, it was a man who told a story of what happened there, and what he said was that when they got there, there was an open grave with planks of wood over it. They were told to strip their clothing, lay down on the planks, and they were shot, one by one, and they, as they were shot, they fell into the grave.

There's 800 people were there. This man was one of the last ones to be put down, and he -- they missed him and only shot him in the arm. After they kind of covered the grave somewhat very lightly, they didn't need to, to do any more, he dragged himself out, and he came back and told us the story. So we understood.

>> Bill Benson: Halina, am I correct that the 800 victims, most were young people?

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. A lot of young people.

>> Bill Benson: Maybe later you'll be able to tell us what you did when you went back to Poland to commemorate them.

>> Halina Peabody: I can now. This was the memory that haunted me. As young as I was, because it was such a horrible, horrible event, that as young as I was, I was just horrified by it, and I never forgot it. I always thought there was nobody -- nobody knew who they were, where they were. The grave was empty. There's nothing on it. I knew that, because we went back to Zaleszczyki at one point and there was nothing.

Through some miracle, I recognized some people from Zaleszczyki in the photo at the museum, and I tracked them down, and there happened to be a few of us, apparently. The problem was I was too young. I didn't know them. They knew me.

I tracked down, I think, about five of them, in Montreal, New York, and

they all welcomed me with open arms. It was the strangest reunion. I didn't know them, and they just loved me because they remembered me as a baby. They knew my family, and they were actually in the midst of collecting money, and they made a deal with the mayor of the town there in Zaleszczyki. We went, April 2011, and we placed a monument on that grave. We had the cantor, he did the Hebrew Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. I have to say, this gave me a little peace. That's the best we could do. But we also had raindrops coming down, and we said it was the tears from up there, from the people.

>> Bill Benson: After that, there were several other actions by the Germans, but your mother began immediately trying to think how she's going to save her two daughters.

>> Halina Peabody: Well, the thing is we wondered about what is going to be next, and when the next demand came for people to go to work in Germany, everybody was already aware of what was happening, so everybody was hiding.

We were hidden by a cook that used to come to cook for us. So then they took another few hundred people away. After that, because the community wasn't that big, it was a small town, they didn't want to have the bother of having to find us, so they threw the whole Jewish community out, whatever was left, and to this place called Touste. Not only us, but from all

around that area, they did the same thing, put us in together, so that they could easily find us.

So we moved to Touste. There was sort of like a ghetto, or it became a ghetto, and we just knew what was going to happen next. Everybody was, first of all, looking for hiding places. My mother said to me, you know, it's not going to help much, because as soon as we find the hiding places, they'll move us again.

She was trying to get us away, trying to put us through some kind of transport to Romania, but nothing worked.

In the meantime, of course, the new demand came again for work in Germany, and everybody was scurrying around, trying to hide. My mother, because we had been in that town before, had a couple of contacts. So she placed me with a farmer in a loft. She herself went and made a deal with another farmer to keep her and my sister through the day whilst they were looking for people.

We separated, and all day long I thought my mother was caught, and the lady used to come back and say to me "This one was seen, this one was seen in the square."

I was devastated. I thought I lost my mother and sister.

Towards the end of the day, she did come to collect me, with my sister, and told me her side of the story. What happened to her was that the

farmer got scared in the middle of the day, because it was a very high penalty if they caught this woman hiding a Jew. So she threw her out into the empty field. The field was flat, just one bush, she told me. She crouched with my sister for the rest of the day in that field. She said it was a miracle they didn't see her. They were circling with planes and just, as I said, it was just a miracle they didn't see her.

At that point, she said to me, "From now on, we're not going to separate" because she thought I was taken. She said, "We're going to stick together. Whatever happens to us, we will be together, whatever happens. "

She started thinking we had nowhere to go, but with the help of her friends they came up with this idea of getting papers from a priest. They made a deal, they purchased the papers. We got a new name and new birthplace, new grandparents. Everything was new. She sat me down, she taught me all this stuff. We were going to try and just run away and go to a place where nobody knew us, see if we could survive. Since we were all girls they couldn't check.

We were put on the train, and left our friends, and we were going to a place called Jaroslav, which was quite a ways in those days. It was going to take two days and two nights on the train, with the changes.

What we had with us, our possessions now were two suitcases and a little money that she collected. That was all we possessed. And we boarded

the train, and we started our journey. A young man attached himself to us, started talking to my mother, and slowly, slowly he started pushing her, pushing her. My mother said to me, "You know, I'm sorry to tell you that I couldn't resist. He was pushing so hard, asking me if there was a Jewish person in the family." My grandfather, father, it was enough if it was a great-great-grandfather. She said "I did tell him that we were actually Jewish. I did tell him that."

At this point, he said "Well, you know, I have to take you to the gestapo, but I am going to Jaroslav as well, so I will accompany you to Jaroslav."

That's how we traveled.

My mother again started thinking, thinking, thinking, there was nowhere to run. She finally came to a decision, and she said "I want to make a deal with you. I will give you the tickets for the suitcases, I will give you the money I have, even promise the coats on our backs," and she said, "All I ask is that when you bring us to the gestapo that you have us shot immediately."

Of course, her fear was that the torture of the kids. She was afraid of losing the kids and separating from the children. He promised. That's how we traveled to Jaroslav.

When we got closer, and when we started getting off the train in Jaroslav, I started remembering that we were going to go and get shot. So I

was getting more and more terrified, and I kept thinking I don't want to die. So I tried pulling at my mother, I said, "Mom, mom, I don't want to die."

So she turned to him, she asked him if he would let me go. Since I was blonde, green-eyed, didn't look Jewish, she felt maybe I have a chance to survive. But I said "No, I don't want to go by myself." It was terrifying.

As we're walking towards the gestapo, she says to him, "Do you have children of your own?"

And he said, "Yes."

So she said to him "Look, I've given you everything I have. You can take everything. Why do you want us on your conscience? Just let us go and try our luck."

And somehow it touched him, and he said "OK," but he said -- in Polish there's a saying that loose translation is "You don't have a chance in hell." But we were just glad that he just left. He left us in the middle of the street.

>> Bill Benson: He took the items with him?

>> Halina Peabody: Of course he did. Of course. We were just glad to be free of him. So we were in a strange town, walking in the middle of the road, we don't know where we are, but my mother, as usual, starts thinking "What next?"

What next, we needed accommodation, we needed to be inside. She

was always worried about the papers, because the papers, to this day I don't know if they were real or not, they're here at the museum, but as I said in those days there were no computers, they couldn't check, but we had no idea. They were given to us, new name, different people. We didn't know.

At any rate, it was very important we should be inside, not be on the street. So we found a little cafe. My mother asked people around there if there was somebody who would rent rooms. One young man got up, said "Yes, I know a nice washer lady just up the road. I will take you there, because she takes lodgers."

So he walked us over there, the lady was really very nice and sweet, and she said "Mother and two children? Yeah, I'll take you."

Her sons were not happy, they told her not to. We looked bedraggled and full of stuff in the hair, everywhere.

>> Bill Benson: You had lice?

>> Halina Peabody: Lice all over the place, clothes, hair, everywhere. Four days, four nights on the train, imagine. But she said "No, no, a mother and two children, I have to take her in."

So she took her in. My mother told her "I have no money, but tomorrow, first thing I do I will go get a job, and whatever I earn I will bring to you."

We got a bed, which is all we needed, because we could all sleep in

one bed very easily. My mother went the next day and found a little job as a housekeeper. She changed this job a couple of times. You had to kind of make do, you had to steal a little bit, people who were a little better off, you steal a little food to bring home, because there was very little food or none.

As non-Jews, of course, there was school for me, for two hours a day, so I went to school. I had very little background in Catholic religion, and I only knew that I had to cross myself coming in and coming out, but very little else. So it was very helpful for me, because then catechism, we immediately learned the catechism, and because I could read it was much easier for me to learn everything, from A to Z.

It was very frightening. You had to watch everything very carefully. I remember once I crossed myself with the left hand, I looked around, terrified that somebody had seen me, of course. Any little thing would have given me away.

>> Bill Benson: Halina, besides having to be able to come across like you're Catholic and know a bit about the catechism, mass, things like that, but you also had different names, therefore different parents.

>> Halina Peabody: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember the difficulty of being able to get that straight, not slip and make a mistake?

>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. It was fear. Fear kept me straight. No, never made any mistake like that. In fact, my mother was --

>> Bill Benson: You understood the gravity of it, even that young?

>> Halina Peabody: Absolutely. Absolutely. My mother knew that. Whatever she said, she was a wonderful parent. She brought me up to listen, whatever she explained, and I was terrified enough not to make a mistake.

But you know, there were little things. There were little things that happened that you could not foresee. The teacher suddenly said -- and in Poland it's very difficult when you're supposed to say hello to people when you see them. It's a silly thing, but if you see somebody, you say hello. She claimed I didn't say hello. And I never saw her. And I remember my mother said, "Don't worry. Just apologize."

I felt it was so unfair. So I took a little chance.

>> Bill Benson: And did not apologize?

>> Halina Peabody: No. No. We kids used to go and do all kinds of things. We used to steal food. The farmers used to bring in contingents. They had to be weighed in, carrots and potatoes, whatever, because we were short of everything. So when they were weighed in and they were leaving the place, that was to give to the Germans, they didn't mind if we climbed up on the back of the thing and grabbed. I remember taking some stuff to bring home.

Very little food. We had barley a lot of time, which I do not like. I never liked it even before the war.

>> Bill Benson: Halina, you, no matter how successful you were at keeping your identity secret, you were still at risk in that particular house, because of the sons.

>> Halina Peabody: Because of the sons, and because also my mother was very worried about my sister's hair. My sister had like an afro, and in Poland the Polish girls have straight blonde hair. She was so worried about that. It was enough if somebody pointed.

She had shaved her head altogether, twice. The poor kid. Of course, my sister didn't know anything, she was a baby. We didn't tell her anything, and she really grew up as a little Polish girl.

>> Bill Benson: At that time, she was also pretty ill, wasn't she?

>> Halina Peabody: Very sick. My mother was very, very worried about her. Finally, she found a second doctor that helped her. In the meantime, my mother got one letter with some news from the people we left, before they perished. They passed on information about my father, who apparently had sent a letter through the Red Cross that he was safe with his sister in Palestine.

We knew there was a part of the family, he has a sister who immigrated to Palestine in 1932 with four children. We never met that part of

the family. We didn't know which town they were in. But we knew that he was safe.

This was something that gave us a little bit of hope, that if and when this war would ever end. So we would have somewhere to go and somebody to get us out of that.

>> Bill Benson: At one point there was a raid on the house that had nothing to do with you.

>> Halina Peabody: That's later. What happened was, my mother was forever trying to find something to make it more secure. One of the things she wanted to do was offer herself for work in Germany. Now, any Pole could do that. They always needed people in Germany. They would have taken us, but my sister was too young. So she would have had to leave my sister. But that didn't work out.

Then she came up with this idea of hiding in plain sight. She thought if she had an ID, like I have, showing she works for the Germans, that that might be useful, and that's when she applied to the German military camp to work. That's why she finally, after weeks of waiting, not knowing, they were checking the papers, they said, after weeks of waiting finally she got her work. She got the job of peeling potatoes, but she had the ID.

One day, one night, the Germans did come storming into the house. They were looking for the younger son of our hostess, who used to -- his job

was killing pigs for a living. That was a death sentence by the Germans. You were not allowed to do that. They never found him. They didn't find him this time. But what they did, they yelled and screamed and took everybody into the station to check them out, if they were working, except for us because my mother came up with this ID. He said "No, you stay." So the only Jews in the house, we stayed. They took the rest to the station. They checked them out. They were all OK, so they came back the next morning.

Again, you know, it was all these little things that could happen, imagine. You just have to be always on the lookout, always worried about that.

>> Bill Benson: Share with us the incident that your mother told you about when she was working in the German headquarters, when the officer came in with his dog.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes, yes. My mother used to come with tales. She said this officer came into the kitchen, with a dog. He said, "Now, this dog has been trained to smell out the Jew." She said, "Of course, I knew, of course it's impossible." But she said "What if that dog took fancy to me?"

Those are the kind of things. Everything was petrifying. All these little things.

>> Bill Benson: I'm sure, as you put it, in plain sight must have been so terrifying for her, for every moment she was out there.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You and your sister, your mom would continue under those circumstances until right towards the end of the war, of course, when, as the Russians began advancing on Jaroslav you found yourselves in the middle of the attack on Jaroslav.

>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. We were -- one morning we woke up, it was completely silent. We lived on the main road. Usually the cars were back and forth. This morning it was complete silence.

My mother was saying -- she was in bed with my sister, I was standing by her, by the bed, and she was thinking whether she should go back, go into work or not. We didn't know what was the status. We had no radios, no newspapers, no idea what was happening.

So as we were standing, as I was standing there, suddenly there was a tremendous bang, and a bomb fell and split over the house. That's where I was wounded, my hand was wounded. I started crying out. My mother grabbed me.

We went over, through, out of the house, through the kitchen, the roof had fallen in there. We went over that. We walked to the hospital where they treated me. It scared my mother very badly, because they said there was so much dirt in the hand. They had no penicillin, they might have to amputate my hand. You can imagine my mother.

They took me in. They left me in the hospital. My mother stayed with me for a day. She went afterwards back and discovered that the lady, the hostess, our hostess was dead underneath the planks in the kitchen. So we lost her. There was nowhere to go back there. The neighbor took her in, with my sister. She would go back and forth daily to visit me.

The nurses, who were nuns with all of the nice white, I'll never forget the white and the black kaftans, they were beautiful, little blonde hair coming out of some of them, really lovely. They really took care of me and saved my hand.

I just lost a couple of fingers. I guess that was --

>> Bill Benson: Not only was there no penicillin for infection, there was no pain medication or anything like that?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, they had some, but the only pain I had is when they cauterized it. That was the pain. There was no choice.

>> Bill Benson: Now, of course, the Soviets are in control. That was in fact, for Jaroslav, the last day of the war, but your security was still not assured at all. In fact, you had to continue --

>> Halina Peabody: Well, the thing is that I was so happy that the Germans left and the Russians were coming in, that I said to my mother, "Now I can say who I am, my name." She said "Unfortunately not, because there was a pogrom of the Jewish people that came out of hiding, and unfortunately the

Poles killed them."

I say that knowing not all Poles are bad. It's unfortunate that that is what happened to us. We had to keep that pretense for a while, until we left the town. Even further, when we needed to be in another place where they asked us directly, "Are you a Pole?"

Meaning are you not Jewish? We had to keep that pretense for quite a while.

>> Bill Benson: In fact, until essentially leaving the country?

>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. My mother started knitting again to get money, and started placing advertising to find my father. My father had no idea we survived.

>> Bill Benson: You say advertising, you mean in Palestine?

>> Halina Peabody: Wherever. Everybody was looking for people. So she placed -- but she obviously would target Palestine, and by some again miracle the people in the station in Tel Aviv knew my father personally. So immediately the contact was made. Immediately, when I say immediately it took a long time. Mail was slow. But my father arranged for my cousin, who was in the British army, to come back to Poland, and to put us in touch with the Jewish agency. They would take us out of the country, and we would rejoin him.

What I learned about him was that, as I said, he managed to get out of Russia by running away from the prison he was in, by joining General

Anders, who was asked by Stalin to create a group of Polish prisoners to fight the Germans.

They were all worried, and they were short of men. This was an agreement between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, that he would let some people out. That's how my father came out, and my aunt and uncle and cousin. They came out of Russia. They ended up in Palestine. My father was actually in the Polish unit, which was part of the British army. They were stationed in Egypt.

When finally we got reunited, we had the choice of either going to Palestine or to England. We ended up going to England. That's where I grew up the rest of the time, and that's where I started learning English, which was very difficult.

>> Bill Benson: Before we continue on with that, Halina, tell us about how you got out of the country and leaving Poland, then making your way to Italy, and then to England.

>> Halina Peabody: Well, we were in a communal home, which Polish police attacked, but they didn't get in. That was one of the things. Then what they did, they had this arrangement with the trucks would take us out just past the frontier, between Germany and Poland, and they would bribe the guards with some vodka, and they allowed -- there was a quiet agreement that the Jews were going to be allowed to leave Poland, if they wanted to.

So they had these trucks going over, and in our case the guards, of course, the Russian guard wanted more watches. They loved watches. Full of pocket watches. They had to give extra watches.

Then we were supposed to make our way to the railway station to go to Berlin on the train. But what happened was they refused to sell us tickets, because we were Jews, and it was after the war. But somehow, I don't know, this -- as I said, there was a Jewish agency already in charge, they managed to get us through. We ended up being in a DP camp for a very short time, because --

>> Bill Benson: Before you got to the DP camp there was the extraordinary ironic situation you ran into.

>> Halina Peabody: Oh, yes. When we were in the communal home, they suddenly decided that we were not Jews, that we were pretending to be Jews in order to get out of Poland.

[Laughter]

So my mother was saying, wait a minute, my husband's name was Isaac. That was all we could do.

>> Bill Benson: You had papers that said you were Catholic Poles.

>> Halina Peabody: That's correct. That's correct. But by then, I think, somebody remembered my mother or something, and so we were let through.

>> Bill Benson: You went to the DP camp for a short while.

>> Halina Peabody: In Italy. It was beautiful there. I wanted to stay longer but we were sent in the first transport to England, which was miserable. Rainy and gray. We ended up near Liverpool. Very, very depressing.

>> Bill Benson: Where did you actually reunite with your father?

>> Halina Peabody: That was Munich. Finally caught us there, because he missed us a couple of times.

>> Bill Benson: It had been how long since you had seen him?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, I was close to 14. So --

>> Bill Benson: Seven years. What was that like?

>> Halina Peabody: Difficult.

>> Bill Benson: One of the things you said that I thought was particularly poignant was you'd been really your mother's companion and partner, and now you're -- say a little more about that, if you're willing.

>> Halina Peabody: Well, he was very impressive, a half lieutenant, he had a leather strap. The difficulty was I was my mother's partner, we were together always. My sister didn't know who she was, who we were. Only the two of us. Suddenly, my father comes on the scene, and I'm baby sitting.

>> Bill Benson: Back to being a child, their daughter.

>> Halina Peabody: A little bit, yes.

>> Bill Benson: When you got to England, and of course now you've got to start a new life there, one of the things you know I'm going to want you to share, of course, is you'd had this very serious injury, and the way you explained it to me is it really affected your confidence and --

>> Halina Peabody: Of course.

>> Bill Benson: In a big way. You're self-conscious. So you took up table tennis.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. I wanted tennis. Actually, I love tennis. But there were no facilities. In college there was a table there, and we started playing table tennis. Then when we bought a house in London, there was a youth club, Maccabi youth club, a Jewish youth club, they're all over the world. I joined the club and played more table tennis. I played a lot.

We had a team, we went around, like here, they have leagues, we did a lot of that. I did not know that, but of course, in the meantime, Palestine became Israel. So far away from me, I never even thought of it as a place to go. But in 1953, they told us that the Maccabiah games were going to be on, and they were going to send a team representing England to Israel. By then, I was pretty good, and the honor of representing England.

>> Bill Benson: She was the country champion.

[Laughter]

>> Halina Peabody: No, no, no, not the country. Not England. Not England.

>> Bill Benson: You were still a champion.

>> Halina Peabody: Maccabiah. At any rate, that was my first trip to Israel, which was absolutely fantastic. I thought I'd found my Shangrila. I spent two months, I found my family. I met my two girlfriends I knew from before the war, vaguely, little kids.

I was in Haifa, in Tel Aviv. It was wonderful. I went back because I knew my mother was waiting for me. I promised myself I will go back again, and unfortunately my mother died in 1956, so I in 1957 went again to the next Maccabiah. It's like Olympic games, every four years. So in 1957. I said to myself, this time I'm going to stay here, just to see how it's like. I had lots of places to stay with, because everybody was wonderful, my cousins, my friends, everybody.

So then I liked it so much that I got my sister over as well, and she met her future husband there. She actually went back to England. I stayed. I worked first for a British company, and then when they sold the refineries to the Israelis, my Hebrew wasn't good enough, so I looked for another job and found one at the American embassy in Tel Aviv. That's why I'm here. That's where I found my husband and how we first came to the United States.

I first went to Palo Alto, then we came here. I thought we'd go back to Israel, but my son was going to school, and we just loved it here too. So I've been here ever since, and when I retired I was lucky enough to find this job of

volunteering at the museum. And I feel very, very grateful for that, that the museum gives us this opportunity to talk about our story and to give you what happened, to give you an eyewitness account, which people tell me is very important. So I'm very happy to share it with you.

>> Bill Benson: Halina, I think we have time for a few questions from our audience. Before we do that, just your mother, who you lost early, was truly a remarkable person.

>> Halina Peabody: That's in her honor I speak, yes.

>> Bill Benson: One of the things you didn't talk about is that she became very ill right after the war ended, and you had to struggle with that.

>> Halina Peabody: She was diagnosed with cancer right after my hand happened. I always think it was because of the tension, of the desperate feeling that she had. My sister was so sickly, her health was ruined. She felt that I was the strong one, and I got wounded. So she was very, very devastated.

>> Bill Benson: It's so wonderful that you now know about that exhibit that will feature your mom, that you get to go to.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. That was my second goal.

>> Bill Benson: Wonderful. We're going to turn to you. We've got hands popping up already. We have some mics here. So if you just make your

question as brief as you can, then Halina will respond to it.

>> Thank you for sharing. I think I would have liked your mother very much.

>> Halina Peabody: Thank you.

>> When you were in hiding, did you ever suspect there were other families doing the same type of thing?

>> Halina Peabody: We did, but I don't think there was anybody there that could answer that. There were apparently people hiding, but none, I didn't meet anybody. Went to church, went to school, no, nowhere. This was a little Polish town. I don't think there were that many Jews there. Although, apparently there had to be some. But no, never.

>> Bill Benson: One over here.

>> My question is, did you secretly express your Jewish faith between your sister and your mother? Did you observe the sabbath? Any other religious holidays? Or were you super scared that you couldn't do that?

>> Halina Peabody: No. First of all, my sister didn't know she was Jewish. We didn't tell her. In fact, when she was asked, when she was accused of being Jewish when the Russians came in, somebody said "You can tell us now, you're Jewish." She said "Look at me. I don't have horns. I don't have a tail." She had no idea. No idea. No.

We were not observant as Jews. At 7, certainly, I knew I was going to Hebrew school. That's all I knew. I could only sign my name in Hebrew. I

was not quite 7. We were not very observant. We were Jewish. That's all I knew. Then my mother kept me straight. My mother was very clever, I thought. Of course, she said to me, "Look, we all pray to the same God, and it doesn't matter whether you're Jewish, Catholic or whatever. You're Jewish. You're born Jewish, you might as well stay Jewish. It's better that way." But that's all.

I never had any problems with that. I'm not observant today, either, I'm sorry to say. Maybe it's wrong, but I think that by being with the museum, I think that's how I express my Jewishness, and I love Israel. In Israel people aren't very observant, either, so --

[Laughter]

So I don't feel that it's a bad thing.

I think that the lucky thing about being Jewish is they don't excommunicate you if you don't do it.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: It's also important to remember even if you had been inclined to try to practice a little bit of your faith, you were living in a teeny house with a lot of other people so the risks were unimaginable.

>> Halina Peabody: No way.

>> You said you were separated from your father for seven years. What was that like, and how did you make up for lost time?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, you do the best you can. He had problems getting a job, because after he was out of the army, his language wasn't good. He had to go back to some courses, so he couldn't be a dentist for a while. It wasn't easy. It was -- the brunt of the problem was from my mother, not me. I went to school, and all they wanted me is -- all my mother ever wanted was education, education, education. She fought very hard for that. Of course, they couldn't help us in any way. But my sister had no problems because she was only like 5 1/2. I had a much harder time.

I had my table tennis. That was mostly what happened. It's not easy. Families are complicated, and especially if you're separated for seven years. It can't be easy. I think that the brunt of the problem was from my mother, and I was so sorry that she, after all she went through, after all she did, she had this hard life afterwards as well.

>> Bill Benson: I think we're probably at the time to bring it to a close, so I'm going to turn back to Halina to close our program in just a moment. I want to thank all of you for being here. We have *First Person* programs every Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. If you have the opportunity, if you live locally, come back. If you don't, plan another vacation. Don't put it off till next year. We'd love to have you back here.

We have a tradition here, that is that our *First Person* has the last

word. After Halina is done, you're going to step down off the stage, you can

stay for a few minutes?

>> Halina Peabody: Absolutely.

>> Bill Benson: If you want to meet her, ask a question, please absolutely do

that.

>> Halina Peabody: Well, I want to say thank you very much for coming and being willing to listen to these stories. I think it's important for the people to hear eyewitness stories, because there's still people who deny that it happened. It's just a warning for the future, because a lot of people stood by and did nothing, and you can't do that anymore. Everybody needs to help in watching, being vigilant and trying to help everybody else in this world.

I'm very, very keen talking to young people, and as I said, I'm very happy to honor my mother and the 6 million that we lost.

I will never stop mourning them, but that's my burden, and I just hope that you will learn something from that, and I'm sure that having just come to the museum you already are well on the way, so I don't want to preach.

Thank you so much for listening.

[Applause]