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1:00-2:00 p.m.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: ERIKA ECKSTUT

(Remote CART)

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>> Bill Benson: Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson, I am the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us. We are in our 14th year of the *First Person* program. Our *First Person* today is Mrs. Erika Eckstut, 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 run through the middle of August. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Erika Eckstut will share with us her *First Person* account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, there will be an opportunity at the end of our program for you to ask Erika a few questions.

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

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

Erika was born June 12, 1928, in Znojmo, Czechoslovakia, the first arrow on this map of Europe points to Czechoslovakia. In 1931 Erika, her sister and parents moved to the province of Bukovina, the home of Erika's paternal grandparents. Our second arrow points to Romania.

Erika Eckstut was the second daughter of Dolly and Ephraim Neuman. Here we see Dolly and

Ephraim with their daughters Erika and Beatrice. In this photo taken between 1933-1934.

Erika's father, Ephraim, poses here with the students of the Stanesti Hebrew School, which he founded. Erika, Beatrice and Ephraim are in this photo. The circle is Erika and her father is in the middle at the very top. I can put the arrow, you will see that's Erika's father right there.

Erika also attended public school. Here we see a group portrait of the Neuman family in a garden. Seated from left to right are Erika's grandmother, Faige Pessia Neuman, her great grandmother and Abraham Neuman, her grandfather. Standing left to right are Max Neuman, and her parents, Dolly Geller Neuman and Ephraim Neuman.

In 1940, the Soviet Union occupied the province of Bukovina, including the town of Stanesti. A year later, when Romania joined Nazi Germany, the Soviets were driven from Stanesti. In the fall of 1941, the Neumans were forced to settle in the Czernowitz ghetto where the living conditions were poor and the Jews were subject to deportation to Transnistria. Here we see the official identification card bearing a large yellow star issued by the County Office of the Jews of Cernauti to Erika Newman authorizing her to remain in Cernauti, rather than be deported in 1942.

Here we see Erika reading a magazine in the Cernauti ghetto. In 1943, Erika and her sister Beatrice escaped from the ghetto on false papers that their father had obtained. After escaping to the Soviet Union, Erika and Beatrice returned to Czechoslovakia where they were eventually reunited with their parents.

We close the slide presentation with this wedding portrait from Erika's wedding to Robert Kauder, an officer in the Czech army, on August 28, 1945. Erika would have two children. She eventually immigrated to the United States in 1960. Although Erika was not able to resume her

medical studies that she began in Prague, Czechoslovakia, after the war, she began a career as a medical technician after arriving in the United States.

Until this past fall Erika lived in the Washington, DC area with her husband Donnie, who passed away on September 4, 2012. Erika and Donnie, who were married in 1963, would have celebrated their 50th anniversary in January. Erika has a son and daughter, six grandchildren and five great grandchildren. She now lives in New Jersey, where she is close to her daughter, Elise, who is here with Erika today. If you wouldn't mind, let people know you're here. Thank you.

Until Erika moved to New Jersey, she volunteered here at the museum's donor and membership desk. She has spoken many times in many different settings about her Holocaust experience and especially enjoys speaking at schools and military installations. Just yesterday, for example, she spoke at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research in Silver Spring, Maryland. Erika is also a contributor to the museum's publication "Echoes of Memory" which features writings by survivors who participate in the museum's writing class for survivors. After today's program Erika will be available to sign copies of "Echoes of Memory," which is also available in the museum bookstore.

With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mrs. Erika Eckstut.

[Applause]

>> Erika Eckstut: Hello. Hello, hello to everybody. I can't really walk well, but I don't like to take no help from anybody. I always say "Don't help. I can walk."

>> Bill Benson: She made that very clear to me before we got up here.

>> Erika Eckstut: I have my little thing here. I usually walk with that.

>> Bill Benson: Erika, thank you so much for being here today, being willing to be our *First Person*. You have so much to share with us in a short period, so we'll just start right away, if you don't mind. You were born in Czechoslovakia, but your family moved to a small town in Romania when you were very young. In 1940 Romania was occupied by the Russians. In 1941, when you were just 13, the Germans enter Romania which forever changed your family's life and your community.

Before we turn to the war years, tell us a little bit about your family and your life before war began.

>> Erika Eckstut: We moved to Romania because my grandfather married a Romanian lady, and my father was from five brothers, and one of the brothers was killed in the First World War, and my father was shot very badly. The other three went to America.

When we came there, before the Holocaust started, we had a very good life. My grandfather had a cow, a horse and chickens, and I was a little girl, but I was always with the chickens. He put me there and gave me a little bag, and I had to take all of the eggs and not to break one. I was very good. I didn't break not one egg.

Life for me was very good. My sister, she was wonderful. She was a wonderful daughter. I was not a wonderful daughter. I really and truly loved my grandfather, and my father did not agree with what my grandfather thought. When I would ask him what's going to happen when I'll be in school and the boy will try to hurt me. He said, that's no problem. One boy hurts you, you hurt three.

>> Bill Benson: That was your grandfather?

>> Erika Eckstut: My grandfather, of course. I couldn't do nothing just like that. When I came home and I told my father what grandfather told me, he didn't like it at all, and he gave me a long lecture.

I couldn't understand why he didn't like that I could hit three boys instead of one. I got a long lecture. My father loved to give lectures, and I got a long lecture.

>> Bill Benson: You described yourself to me as a wild duck.

>> Erika Eckstut: Yeah, that's what I was.

>> Bill Benson: That's what you were?

>> Erika Eckstut: I was. I was a wild duck, and I, when the Holocaust started, I was never home, and the first time when I went out I never had any ID. We had ID, all, and I just walked out. I heard my mother talk to her friend, and tell them that my father has a friend and he was a priest, and she told the friend. I heard it. I remember it very well. I had no problem.

>> Bill Benson: Before you go there, if you don't mind, you were under the Russians for about a year?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes, that's true. In Romania about the first year, and we were under the Russians. I didn't speak Russian, but they were a year there, and we had to go to school. I couldn't read, but I could speak Russian. I don't know how I learned it.

>> Bill Benson: But you did?

>> Erika Eckstut: I did. I could speak it, but otherwise, I wasn't really a good girl at all.

>> Bill Benson: In 1941, then, that's when the Germans came in.

>> Erika Eckstut: The Germans came in, and that was really very bad time.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what happened when they first arrived. You've described it to me before.

>> Erika Eckstut: It's really not to be able to describe it. Who could describe? I mean, I wasn't -- I never wore any ID on me. Nobody can figure out who I was. But I do have blue eyes and my hair

now is very light, but it used to be blonde. In the meantime, I had cancer and all, I didn't have any hair, then it started growing and growing all white.

So when I -- when they came, I spoke German fluently. I had no problem with the German, either. I never told anybody anything about myself, that I'm Jewish or whatever. Doesn't matter. Nobody knew. That went on for quite a while, and --

>> Bill Benson: Erika, soon after the Germans arrive, your family came very close to being murdered.

>> Erika Eckstut: Absolutely.

>> Bill Benson: Right away. Tell us what happened.

>> Erika Eckstut: You know, my father was, by profession, a lawyer. He was working and in charge of the people. And when the Russians came they went after him like he was the biggest -- what do you call it? Biggest against the Germans.

>> Bill Benson: He was so prominent, they were after him?

>> Erika Eckstut: Right, they were after him. They really and truly, when they got him, he walked with a cane. I walk now with that, and I can't walk very well. Why I walk with the wagon, I am very proud of it. I had, really and truly, helped my father. We were in the ghetto, and then we were supposed to go to the concentration camp. There was a train designated to take us. When we went there, my father thought he saw somebody he knew, and he waved. As soon as he waved, a soldier came, was coming, I don't know if he had a stone there or whatever, he went straight to my father. Before he was there, I was on top of my father. My father was down, I was on top.

I got the beating, which I remember until today. And what it did to me, that I couldn't really

walk very well. I had to end up with that thing, which I hold on. I try not to use it, but I can't really walk. Now I'm a little younger, you know. It's harder and harder.

>> Bill Benson: As you get younger?

[Laughter]

>> Erika Eckstut: As I get younger.

>> Bill Benson: Erika, one of the things that I know you want to mention is soon after the Germans came in, you were forced with your family to go to a place where they had gathered all of the Jews in the community.

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what happened there.

>> Erika Eckstut: You know, we were forced, whatever we did we didn't do on our own. We were always forced to do this or to do that. They forced us to go to a place where it wasn't really very good to go there.

I have to just mention my sister. My sister was about almost five years older than me. She was a wonderful daughter, really wonderful. She never did what wasn't supposed to be done, and she just was a very, very good child.

I was never, never, ever a good child. I was not. Whenever they came to hurt us, if I could I would always be the one to protect them. I mean, not that I could protect them really, but I did whatever I could. It was so bad that I remember, I have a picture really, when I went with a friend of my sister, and a boy who was 17, I was about 12 or 13, I don't remember exactly, and my sister took a picture of us. When she took the picture, whoever saw it was going after her, which was very bad,

because she couldn't do nothing to help herself.

They were after her, and it was terrible, you know, the way -- everything that happened was very, very bad.

>> Bill Benson: Erika, one of the things I know you've told me about is when the Germans first came, they gathered everybody in a field and started shooting everybody, and you were able, you and your father were able to, and your family were able to survive that. Then your father was told to get out of town, and you moved.

>> Erika Eckstut: You see, that was the time when the policemen who knew my father very well told my father that he has to get out of the town, that he will not survive it. You know, these people didn't like any Jews. He was a prominent person. They didn't like him at all. Not at all. When they said we had to go, one of the policemen said they will take us.

You see, my father and my grandmother couldn't really walk. My grandmother wasn't around anymore; she had passed away. My father really couldn't walk much. He walked with a cane. They had a wagon for my grandmother and for my father, but it didn't do a lot of good, because people were coming.

They killed people, I remember all the children were also there, and they killed the children. It didn't make a difference who you were. It didn't matter if you were 6, 8, 12, 14, 15, whatever you were, they just killed right and left. Never bothered them at all.

That was also, at that time, they killed almost all my friends. I remember when we were kids, 12 years old, and they would say if we survive, are you going to talk about it? I said I will talk to everybody who is going to listen.

Not everybody was a big talker. I said I will talk, and I did. As soon as I could, my sister wouldn't talk to you for nothing. She never believed that anybody would believe her when she said about this.

>> Bill Benson: After you were able to survive the first time they were killing everybody in your community, eventually you and your family would be forced into the ghetto.

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about being in the ghetto. You started to tell us about the name of the priest that you had, and that was very important to your survival too. So --

>> Erika Eckstut: That was very important too, for us to survive all together.

When I found out that my father had a friend, and I knew his name, I went where they were selling food.

>> Bill Benson: You're in the ghetto, but you're able to go into the town?

>> Erika Eckstut: That was against the law to get out of the ghetto.

>> Bill Benson: You just did it?

>> Erika Eckstut: I just got out. Nobody ever stopped me or nothing. I went there and I bought whatever I could. When it came to pay, I said, father, whatever his name was, will pay. I had a woman who I met during my trip there. I cannot forget her name. The priest's name I've forgotten. A lot of other names I've forgotten. But I can't forget that name, because I had a run-in with the police. The first time when I went out and I bought the food and I came home, my mother fainted because she realized I wasn't home. She couldn't find me.

My father, when he saw me, he said "How did you pay?"

I said "I didn't want to -- I didn't want to really lie to my father, because if you lied you hurt the person.

I said, "I heard somewhere that you have a friend. I thought if I used his name, maybe I can get the food." Because I didn't have any money. He said "I know you didn't. Where did you hear that I had a friend?"

I said, "I can't remember." He said "You have to remember. You're a little kid. Why don't you remember?"

I said, "I don't know why I can't remember."

No matter how my father asked me, I couldn't remember. He said "That's fine. We'll go tomorrow, and you tell me what you did."

Next day, my father said now you're going to go, and you're going to tell him that you used a name when you buy food. I went, when I came there before --

>> Bill Benson: This was a store that sold to priests and nuns only, right?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes. That's right. When I came there, before I even -- he asked me anything, I was already crying, because I knew I did wrong. I was very upset that father was so mad at me. He said "Why are you crying, little girl? What's wrong" I said, "I did something very wrong. I used your name and I bought food, and I went again and I used it again." He never said nothing, so I didn't think it was so bad. But there was a sign outside that if they would find a non-Jew helping a Jewish family, they and their family will be killed. My father didn't want to have anything to do with that. Wouldn't have him killed because I wanted some food. But I didn't know any better.

>> Bill Benson: He told you, the priest told you, it was OK to continue doing this?

>> Erika Eckstut: He said "You can do it every day, as long as you want. But don't talk about it. Don't tell anybody what you are doing." But he said, "You can do it as much as you want." And I did it. I did it maybe a year.

>> Bill Benson: I want you to tell one other, if you will tell one other thing that you shared with me before, and that is the time you'd slipped out of the ghetto to get food and you came across a soldier. Tell us what happened.

>> Erika Eckstut: He didn't know, of course, that I'm Jewish.

>> Bill Benson: Right.

>> Erika Eckstut: He wanted to know why I bought whatever I bought. When I started to tell him, I don't really remember exactly what happened, but he wanted to know who I am. I didn't really want to tell him the truth, who I am.

It was a terrible thing which happened. But I can't really and truly remember exactly what happened, but it was a terrible thing.

>> Bill Benson: I was thinking of the time when you came across this German soldier beating an elderly Jew, and you, as a little girl, and here you're outside the ghetto and you jumped into the middle of it.

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes. I would tell him, you're going to get into a lot of trouble. The man is -- I really thought it's a man. I mean, he was bleeding. The soldier said, "That's not a man. It's a Jew." I said, "Who cares what he is? He's bleeding." You know, "You'll get in trouble with the police."

At that moment a man came over, and he said, "OK, little girl, time to get home."

We went, and then I went to the house alone, where I lived --

>> Bill Benson: You couldn't tell him you were actually living in the ghetto.

>> Erika Eckstut: Oh, no.

>> Bill Benson: You just saw a house, and said "That's my house"?

>> Erika Eckstut: The Jews did not live in the house. They lived in the ghetto. We came there, and I rang the bell, why I said "Mama" I have no idea.

>> Bill Benson: To the lady who answered the door?

>> Erika Eckstut: I didn't see who answered. I just said "Mama." When she opened the door, the policeman said, "That's your daughter, madam?"

She said to me "I told you once, I told you twice, home and homework." She said it again and again, and he asked her, he said, "That's your daughter?"

She just didn't do nothing. Just she never, ever said a word to him.

Then I stood like in a dream. I heard his voice. He said "Stop hitting her. Take her in. She'll do the homework." She stopped.

>> Bill Benson: She acted like a really angry mother?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes, yes.

>> Bill Benson: In front of him?

>> Erika Eckstut: In front of him. Never, ever said one word to him. She took me in, wanted to know where I'm from. I told her from the ghetto. She said, you know, you'll have to go back. I said I'm very happy to go back, and I thank you very much. And I could never forget her name, never.

>> Bill Benson: Erika, conditions got worse and worse in the ghetto. At some point is your parents made a huge decision to send you and your sister out of the ghetto to leave. Tell us what happened.

>> Erika Eckstut: When I just think about it, it was an impossible thing to do, and my parents were talking mainly to my older sister. Of course, to me too. They told me, "Don't do no new things," you know. We had to leave. My mother went to the priest, and my father told her to ask him this for the children, if he could give her some papers that they had.

>> Bill Benson: False papers for you and your sister?

>> Erika Eckstut: Of course, false. When he said "What about you and your husband, you don't need nothing?"

"Just for the kids."

He also gave us two crosses. He told her how they cross themselves, we have to cross ourselves, and to make sure that we cross ourselves. But the papers, we tried not to show anybody, because they're not all right.

We both put on crosses and we took the papers, and we went. We ended up in jail. When we were alone, we spoke German. A policeman heard us speaking.

>> Bill Benson: A Russian policeman hears you speaking German?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes. He took us, put us in jail. We did tell him the truth, we said we are not Germans. We had the cross on. But we ran from the Germans. So we have to stay. About three weeks later, he came and he said to my sister, she was older, he said, "What kind of holiday do you think you will have now?"

Started to think for a minute, she said "April." Only holiday we have is passover. He said, "You're right. Come with me." He took us to the door and let us go.

We couldn't believe we were free to go.

>> Bill Benson: Now you're free in Kiev, right?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yeah. It was terrible, because it didn't really help us. We had no money or anything to do, but it was a terrible time. I just talk about it, I think how everything was, it was unbelievably bad.

>> Bill Benson: Here you are a little girl, 13 or so, with your sister, in Kiev, without your parents, and yet you would find a place to live there for a while?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes. My sister found a place where we lived, and we found a lady we thought was an old lady. We found out later she wasn't an old lady. She was 37. But at that time --

>> Bill Benson: You called her the old lady, right?

[Laughter]

>> Erika Eckstut: For us, it was an old lady. She wasn't really an old lady. But for us, she was an old lady. It was really -- you know, everything was so bad. Whenever I came home, my mother was always so upset and so happy to see me. Then when we came home we always had some food. I always said that's for grandma and grandpa, but they wouldn't eat it. They were very, you know -- kept their religion very close, and they wouldn't eat what I brought, because it wasn't kosher.

>> Bill Benson: That was before you went to Kiev?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Once you were in Kiev with your sister found a job?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You were living in the household with the old lady as you called her, the old woman. Then something terrible happened with your sister. Tell us what that was.

>> Erika Eckstut: She would never do anything which wasn't according to the rules. She was -- from then on, we never, ever spoke German to each other. We did speak Russian, because we went one year to Russian school.

I don't really know exactly where it happened or what happened to her. She got into so much trouble that I don't know really how the whole thing started, but I also got into trouble, but not like that.

>> Bill Benson: She was suspected of being a German spy, right?

>> Erika Eckstut: Oh, absolutely. She looked like a German spy. Her hair was blonde and she looked German. Really and truly, she looked German. She couldn't say "I'm German."

>> Bill Benson: You had to leave Kiev then, right?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes. We went and we became -- we were, what do you call it, we had some kids who were little and we were taking care of them. It was terrible. Terrible for us with the kids. We didn't know what to do with the kids. We weren't far from being kids ourself. It was really very, very bad.

You know, when I just think about it, not to be able really to describe how bad it was.

>> Bill Benson: When you left Kiev it was you and your sister and the old lady, the three of you left?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yeah. Then we came to the border of -- at that time, it was Czechoslovakia, because the Slovaks were with the Czechs together. No problem, nothing. Also, when they left us, there was no war or anything between us. They were staying alone, we were staying, but it became the Czech Republic.

>> Bill Benson: You were going to go to Poland from Russia, right, from Kiev?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes. We went. We went, we had the old lady, we went there, and we were in Russia. This soldier, we met this soldier, this soldier came to our house and took us in, he said I "I have here the wife of a colonel" or whoever. And his daughter, two daughters and the mother.

>> Bill Benson: This is what the Russian soldier was telling somebody in Poland at the border?

>> Erika Eckstut: No, no, that's what we told. We told him she's our mother and we're her kids.

>> Bill Benson: Right.

>> Erika Eckstut: He said, "Yes, we have a room, you have to go upstairs." We went upstairs.

Maybe 20 minutes later, my sister comes in. She was walking around. She said we have to run right now. Because the woman was talking to somebody, and she said I have three Jews here, you can have them all.

So the old lady started to talk, and that she doesn't want to go. The soldier at that time that we also met, we also met the son there. He was the one who brought us there.

>> Bill Benson: He was the soldier?

>> Erika Eckstut: He was the soldier. When he wanted to take her out, was talking, asked to open the window, she said you push her out, then you come.

I was looking, she was half the size of the lady. She was skinny like you couldn't see nothing. She was really skinny as can be. She stood there with her arm to catch the lady.

She didn't really catch her, but she broke her fall. Then she didn't hold the hand for me anymore.

>> Bill Benson: She didn't break your fall?

>> Erika Eckstut: No. And I didn't break a leg or nothing. The lady didn't break nothing, either. We just made it. I mean, it was terrible. Then we also, when we left, we found the place they had kids, I think, they had two kids.

Anyway, in Poland, we left that night, we left Poland. I always said if you want to take me to Poland, I can do whatever I want. I will go. I was scared. I was scared then, and I'm scared now. I would never, ever go.

>> Bill Benson: You and your sister and the old lady left Poland, then from there you make your way back to --

>> Erika Eckstut: Back to Czechoslovakia. Then we met -- originally, we were also at the Czech border, and we got a lot of food. We were hungry as can be. We got a lot of food. After we were sick as dogs. Because we ate. I don't know what it was there, but whatever they gave us, we ate everything. When we had to go away, we went, then we met the soldiers. Between those soldiers was an officer, and he wanted to marry --

>> Bill Benson: These were Russian soldiers?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yeah, they came there. They wanted to -- then we met also the soldiers we met before, and my sister found the guy who wanted to marry her. She asked him, would you please marry me? He said "Of course. I asked you then, you didn't want to." She said "I would like it if you would marry me." He said "Right away. I am ready to marry you." He was 15 years older than her. It was really a very, very bad time. Very bad time.

>> Bill Benson: If the soldier was going to marry your sister, what was going to happen to you?

>> Erika Eckstut: To me it was a very good thing that happened. Nobody thought it was good, but it was a good thing. He was also in the army. When we came to Czechoslovakia at that time, I mean -- when I say we came, it's like nothing happened. Finally, when we came to the Czech Republic, my sister got married and his best man went somewhere. He went where he came from, and he found out that his mother and his sister were killed. They were not there anymore. And then his father went after him to Russia, because -- everything is a long story. If I will tell everything the way it was, we would be here until tonight.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: We would.

>> Erika Eckstut: We couldn't be here until tonight.

When the soldier, he already married them, he came back, he said "Would you marry me?" I said "Sure. Great. I won't have to go to school." I wasn't exactly crazy about school.

[Laughter]

So I said "Sure." When he wanted to get married, they wouldn't marry me. I was 16 already, but I had to be 17 to get married. He found an aunt, the aunt had a husband who wasn't Jewish. Anyway --

>> Bill Benson: This was in the spring of 1945, the war is still going on in other parts of Europe?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Now you and your sister have found husbands that are members of the Czech army, right?

>> Erika Eckstut: Absolutely.

>> Bill Benson: When did you know that, for you, the war was over, for you and your sister?

>> Erika Eckstut: That's really a very good question. The funny thing is I never thought that the war was over. When I was with this soldier, I felt more secure. But the war wasn't over. It still wasn't over. It still was bad.

>> Bill Benson: I know there are some things you could have told us that were really terrible, where you were afraid of marauding Russian soldiers until you met men that would marry you. Eventually you would find your way back to reunite with your parents. How did you --

>> Erika Eckstut: That was the worst thing. For us the best thing which ever happened, but you see, when we left our parents, we left them in the ghetto.

>> Bill Benson: Right. You didn't know what happened to them?

>> Erika Eckstut: That's right, we didn't know what happened. We could not have gone to look for them, because we didn't have any papers. We had the piece of paper which was no good, and that wasn't good for us either. My sister made me give it away too. I didn't want to. For me, it saved my life. I wanted to keep it as a memento. My sister said no. We have two children and they needed it. I had to give away, which I really didn't like the idea. It was really the most horrible thing I have ever done.

>> Bill Benson: How did you get reunited with your parents?

>> Erika Eckstut: That's the problem. I don't know they could do anything they wanted. They were in the army, they had papers.

>> Bill Benson: Your husbands?

>> Erika Eckstut: Our husbands. They found out that they were in Bucharest, the capital of Romania.

>> Bill Benson: Your parents?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes. We left them in Czernowitz, they were in Bucharest. They made arrangements to go there. When they came to my parents, we said we were both married. When my father heard I am married, he almost had a heart attack.

[Laughter]

I was really 16 years old. I was really something. It was very bad, but we -- he wanted to annul my wedding, but my husband talked to him, and he didn't do nothing. But everything was bad.

Unfortunately, he was wounded very badly. Everything was really bad.

>> Bill Benson: When you finally -- your husbands found your parents in Bucharest, brought them back. I remember you describing to me you were in your house and you saw your father coming, and I think you jumped out of a second-floor window to get -- rather than go down the stairs, because you saw him coming.

>> Erika Eckstut: That was me. I always liked to do things which I shouldn't have done.

>> Bill Benson: Were you ever able to learn what happened to your parents once you and your sister left?

>> Erika Eckstut: No. They wouldn't talk about it. My father said you don't have to repeat things which hurt a lot. Now we are together with you. That's all we really wanted. No use telling you, because we know you must have gone through hard times, like we did too. It was true. We went through very hard times. Really and truly, I mean, it wasn't -- my late husband, I was so upset, I

thought he was such a good man, and I married him, I thought I don't have to go through that. Next thing I know, we have to go to school. I said what for? He said "You have to go to school." I said "Why do I have to go to school? I'm a married lady." He said "But you don't know anything."

[Laughter]

He was right. I didn't know anything.

>> Bill Benson: You would end up preparing for a career in medicine after that.

>> Erika Eckstut: That's right. I went one year medical school. You know how it's really funny, eventually we settled down, and where we lived my uncle had a man there who was getting a lady from Prague. You know, he wondered if I would go there and show him who. I knew her very well. I went. Behind her I saw a man which looked like the professor. I remember telling how are you not standing straight? I couldn't. I couldn't stay straight.

Anyway, I went to him, I asked him, are you professor so-and-so? He said "Yeah. You are Kauder. You didn't stay straight." I said "That's right."

>> Bill Benson: Once the war was over, May 1945, you and your sister and your family are together again. Then you would end up living under the Soviets for quite a while.

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes. That was really terrible for us. When my husband passed away, it was terrible for me. I asked to go to America, and they wouldn't let me. Then all of a sudden I got --

>> Bill Benson: This was 1959, late 1950s?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yeah. They wouldn't let me really, you know, go. They said that I can go if I want to, but the children can't. I wouldn't leave the children for a minute.

>> Bill Benson: The Soviets and the communist Czechs said you could leave, but not take your children?

>> Erika Eckstut: That's right. They didn't need me, but they wouldn't let the children go. I would never, ever go without the children.

>> Bill Benson: Right. Right.

>> Erika Eckstut: I didn't go. Then later on, I got the thing that I can go with the children, anytime I want. As soon as I could go and get my passport, I went and I left, and I came to America. I was in New York, and it was -- then when I met my husband was very funny the way I met him.

>> Bill Benson: The way you met Donnie?

>> Erika Eckstut: Donnie, yeah.

>> David Young: Tell us how you met Donnie.

>> Erika Eckstut: A friend of my late husband was a friend of the girl who came, she was about 10 years older than me. When she came, she had a sister living here and her husband was a doctor. She asked me if I will take her to Atlantic city.

You see, money I didn't have. Because, when we came, I got \$29 and Elise got \$29 and my son, who was 5, got \$28.

>> Bill Benson: That's what you were allowed to leave with? Elise had \$29, you had \$29 and your son had 28.

>> Erika Eckstut: I felt -- not I felt, but my daughter told me, you know, you and I are like adults, but he's still a kid. So he got a dollar less than we did.

I was working, but I couldn't work with people, because I didn't speak a lot of English. I worked with children. And I worked in the doctor's place, and he had a little boy. I couldn't talk to him in English, so I talked to him in Czech. I would say give me a kiss, he right away gave me a kiss. The lady would say can you teach me how you say it so I can get a kiss too?

[Laughter]

I was telling her what to say to get also a kiss.

You know, it was really, the whole life was so bad.

>> Bill Benson: You were going to tell us how you met Donnie. In Atlantic city, right?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yeah. I had in the bank maybe \$200 or \$300. I don't know. I was working and putting money away. When I had to go, I took out the money, and she had a friend there, and she wanted to visit. So we went there.

Then we came there on Friday night, and I told her I'll take you to the beach. But don't bother me when we get there. I have to sleep. Because I really didn't have any sleep. I worked with kids, and they were up all night.

So I said to her, and she let me sleep. All of a sudden, she woke me. I said why are you waking me? She said, you know, we came here about 9:30. It's 3:00. Have here a person, such a nice person, and you are sleeping.

I said "But I need to sleep. I told you I don't want to be woke." The voice came on, and he said "I'm waiting for you all this time. I said she should wake you and you didn't want to wake," and that was Donnie. He invited us for dinner. I said I'm not going nowhere. But tell me where, I'll bring

her.

We went, and her friend and I, we came there, and where she was supposed to go it was \$5 you had to pay to go in. I'm not going to pay no \$5. That was a lot of money to go in to meet some jerk who I didn't know. I said, "I'm not going to give you nothing."

Her friend said, "I'm not dumb. I wouldn't give you anything either." So we didn't give \$5 go in.

Next day, we were there he came, he wanted to know why she didn't come. And she said because I didn't have money, and my friend Erika wouldn't give me \$5 to go in. So I couldn't come. And she couldn't.

Anyway, then he wanted to have a date with me. I said "I'm sorry. I don't want no date."

Then when I came home, I was making dinner and Elise said -- the phone was ringing. I said is that one of your friends? She said no, it's a man. It was Donnie. He said he would like to come on Saturday. I said I'm sorry, I'm working. I worked on Saturday, because I got time and a half or whatever. He said but you have children. I said, yes, but the children are with my sister.

>> Bill Benson: He was very persistent?

>> Erika Eckstut: He was so persistent.

>> Bill Benson: Then, of course, not too long after that, you got married?

>> Erika Eckstut: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Erika, I'm going to turn to our audience to see if they are have a couple of questions they'd like to ask you. If I remember right, you were one of the first, if not the first person to be able to legally leave the iron curtain and come to the United States.

>> Erika Eckstut: I was. I was the first person to go legally from the Czech Republic.

>> Bill Benson: To America. Remarkable.

>> Erika Eckstut: I was. When I came here, there were people and they took pictures. It wouldn't be good here, because the people couldn't see it. But this album is really --

>> Bill Benson: All the photographers and reporters waiting for you as the first person to legally come from the Czech Republic to the United States.

>> Erika Eckstut: They were very, very nice. I found out who wrote the letter. Because it took about three years later that I --

>> Bill Benson: That you were able to get out. If we had all day like you suggested, we could hear about what you did to actually get out of Czechoslovakia after all you'd been through.

We have time for I think a couple of questions, if anybody would like to ask Erika a question, please do so. When we finish, in a moment, I'll turn back to Erika just to close our program, then she will go right up outside the doors the way you came in and she will be able to meet anybody, but also sign copies of "Echoes of Memory," which she's been a contributor to that book.

Does anybody have a question they'd like to ask Erika? Don't be bashful. If not, that's OK too. People are being bashful today.

I think what I'd like to do is thank all of you -- oh, we got a question. There we go! OK. He's going to hand you the mic right there. Thank you.

>> I have a question about, I noticed you're pretty comfortable talking about your experiences for the most part, and you mentioned that some people aren't as comfortable and they like to just be more -- keep it to themselves more. My question is, does it get easier through time to talk about the really horrific things you went through, or is it just constantly always traumatic and horrible?

>> Bill Benson: Erika, to make sure you heard the question, because you speak frequently and have, does it get easier to talk about all the terrible things you experienced or is it every time you talk about it, it's just as painful as it was before?

>> Erika Eckstut: You know, as soon as I could retire from my job, I came here, and since then I came here to the museum every week, and I always spoke. If not at the museum, outside the museum. And here I have really the girl who used to do it this year with me too.

It's not easier to talk about it, because I don't keep anything for myself. I tell you anything, that it was bad, it's not the truth, it was worse. I don't give you as bad as it was.

So it's not easier to talk about it, definitely not. But I like to talk, and I like for everybody to hear it, and I would like that you should believe that every word I say is the God honest truth. Maybe I don't say it as strong as I should, but everything I say is true.

Even worse than the way I say it.

>> Bill Benson: Erika, your sister, who is now 90 and living in Queens, you said she chose not to speak about it.

>> Erika Eckstut: She wouldn't speak to you for nothing. She didn't promise her friends either, and she wouldn't. She can't believe that the people believe whatever she said.

I have, over and over, I get letters, I have so many letters, and I have my daughter here now, and she knows that the friends of my husband came, and she put everything in order. Not one letter got lost or whatever.

I have every letter, every word anybody sent me. I always answer back. Now I have, since my late husband passed away, it's very hard for me to remember everything the way it was closely, and I

can't, really and truly, talk as well as I used to. But I do like to talk to make sure that everybody knows about it. It was as bad as bad could be.

I happened to be very lucky, because whoever I ever talk to, children or adults or whoever, they always believe me, and they wrote to me. I have beautiful letters from kids or adults.

>> Bill Benson: You had letters with you earlier today. I think we probably need to close the program now. We'll do that. I want to thank all of you for being with us today, remind you we'll have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August and hope you can come back sometime. The museum's websites provides information about each of our programs.

I'm going to turn back to Erika for her final words to you, then she will leave and go up, if you let her get up the side and out so she can be available to sign her "Echoes of Memory," her copies of "Echoes of Memory." It's our tradition at *First Person* that our first person has the last word. So with that, Erika?

>> Erika Eckstut: I have the last word. I love to have the last word. Love, love in general, I like to have the last word.

For me, it was very, very hard. Whatever I went through, it was hard. And I spoke yesterday, when I came home my daughter had a cousin there, and they started to talk to me. I didn't really want to talk to them. I was not -- I had a very good time, because I was with the army, and the army are wonderful people. They let me talk and talk and talk again. And I like to do it as much as I could. Because they're so nice, and they want to know whatever they can. For me, it's one great wish that it never, ever happened. It should never, ever happen ever, to any single person in the whole world. Never should anybody have to go through what we had to go through, because it was impossible to

live through. It was sad, but I remember, what my mother used to say. They said I would never, ever make it. I always took chances. But it never bothered me.

When I see all of the people here, they always say, here at the museum who know me, they said I love all the people who come, and I wouldn't ever miss anybody not to talk or not to tell them whatever they want to hear.

If you have questions, fine. If you don't have questions, fine too. It doesn't matter. But I do believe in you, and I do believe that you believe me too. And I wish you the best of luck, for every single person here. And it should never, ever happen to any of you. Ever. I love you all.

[Applause]

Thank you. Thank you very much.

[End of program.]