Wednesday, August 7, 2013

1:00 p.m. – 2:07 p.m.

**UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM**
***FIRST PERSON* SERIES**
**ESTELLE LAUGHLIN**

REMOTE CART

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**ROUGH DRAFT TRANSCRIPT**
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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 *First Person*. Our *First Person* today is Mrs. Estelle Laughlin 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*. And I'm pleased to let you know that Mr. Louis Smith is here with us today.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Thank you.

*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. We will close our 2013 season after our August 15 program. The Museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests and you can look to the museum's website for information about *First Person* in 2014.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Estelle Laughlin is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Estelle's introduction.

Estelle Laughlin was born as Esterra Wakslak in Warsaw, Poland, on July 9, 1929. She was the younger of two sisters. In addition to her parents, her

family included many aunts, uncles, and cousins. Poland is highlighted on this map of Europe from 1933, and Warsaw is highlighted on this map of Poland; also from 1933.

The Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Soon after the invasion, Estelle and her family were forced to move into the Warsaw Ghetto. In 1943, the family went into hiding in a bunker in the ghetto. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began on April 19, 1943, and continued until the final liquidation of the ghetto, May 16, 1943.

Jewish fighters faced the forces of the Germans but were able to hold them off for a month. Estelle and her family were hiding in a bunker during the uprising and were among those discovered and forced out of hiding. We see here an historical photograph of German soldiers leading Jews captured during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising to the assembly point for deportation in 1943, May 1943.

After they were discovered, Estelle and her family were deported to the Majdanek concentration camp where Estelle's father was killed. The location is highlighted on this map of extermination camps in Poland.

Estelle, her mother and sister endured labor in two more camps before eventually being liberated by the Russians. Estelle, her mother and sister emigrated to the United States in 1947 on the Marine Flasher.

We close the slide presentation with Estelle's immigration certificate, which was issued in July of 1947.

When Estelle, her sister and mother arrived in New York in 1947, they had $30 between them. Estelle and her sister went to work in the garment district.

She met her husband, a survivor from Berlin, in New York. After marrying, they moved to Cleveland where her husband was a labor organizer. After the birth of their first son, Estelle began attending college in Cleveland and finished after they moved to the Washington, D.C., area in 1961 when her husband joined the Kennedy Administration. They would have three sons.

Estelle became a teacher in Montgomery County, Maryland. She earned her Master's Degree and became a reading specialist. And she retired in 1992. Estelle's three sons are very accomplished. One is a professor of Geology, another is a psychologist, and the third holds a senior corporate position. Between them they have given Estelle seven grandchildren; one for each day of the week, as she puts it.

Estelle's husband died in 2008, she moved two years ago from the Washington, D.C., area to Chicago to be close to family. Estelle volunteers at the museum's Speakers Bureau. Until her 2011 move to Chicago she was also a member of the Survivors Writing Group and a contributor to the museum's publication "Echoes of Memory." She has recently written a book about her and her family's experience during the Holocaust entitled, "Transcending Darkness: A Girl's Journey Out of the Holocaust." It was published by Texas Tech University Press in November 2012. It was named a finalist for the 2012 ForeWord Reviews Book of the Year Awards. Following today's program, Estelle will sign copies of her book outside the entrance that you came into the theater.

With that, I would like you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mrs. Estelle Laughlin.

[Applause]

Estelle, welcome and thank you so much for being willing to be our *First Person* today.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: We have just an hour. And you have so much to share with us, so we'll get started right away.

You were just 10 years of age living in Warsaw, Poland, when World War II began after Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939. Before we turn to the war and to the Holocaust and all that happened to you and your family, let's start first with you telling us a little bit about your family and yourself and your life and your community before the war began.

>> Estelle Laughlin: I was born in Warsaw, Poland. Warsaw was the center of my universe. In my selective memory, gold and radiance, open blue skies, air filled with fragrance, rich sounds of good neighbors, kindness and trust and love. Magic train rides through the countryside during the summer later became sheltered in my mind from a world crumbling around me.

>> Bill Benson: You've told me that, as you said, your magic train rides, when you said you think of that time, you think of loving neighbors. Tell us a little bit more of what that life was like and about your parents. Tell us a little bit about them.

>> Estelle Laughlin: It was a secure, loving home. It was a world -- I was very young -- full of trust. It was my world. The trees were my trees. The sky was my sky. Visits with families,

holiday. Just paradise. Particularly the darker life became later. The brighter, the period, the paradise of my life shone.

I guess that we often valued things more at a loss in our memory than at the moment that we experienced them because we take them for granted as we take our time. And that is the way I think life should be lived. We should take our parents, our friends, our normal life, kind life for granted but it often gets interrupted.

>> Bill Benson: Before we move to that interruption, and more than that by a long shot, you -- from what I know from you and what I read in your book, you are very close to your father. Tell us just a little bit about him.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, my father was a wonderful role model for me. He was a very kind, very accomplished person but very mindful of other people. I know that you often refer to that example that was during the ghetto, when there was a great hunger. And I gave my sandwich away to hungry people. The streets were littered with homeless, dying, hungry people. And my mother, who was a very poetic person, loved beauty, loved humanity, told me: well, you should not have given your sandwich away because we don't know if there will be any food tomorrow. My father, on the other hand, said, “You gave your sandwich away; you did the right thing. Look how hungry you are now. Imagine how hungry the child to whom you gave your sandwich to was.” He taught me that stepping outside your own skin was essential to surviving with love and compassion and joyful light. And he served as an example like that throughout the war.

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, Germany invaded Poland, of course, 1939. Warsaw was attacked

that very day. What do you remember on the attack on Warsaw and the long siege that occurred after that? What do you remember in that very early part of the war?

>> Estelle Laughlin: September 1939 was the day like today. My father left the house -- my father was a jeweler. He left the house to see his client. He kissed us, left the house. Sometimes during the day there was a very explosion that made the earth tremble; then a silence followed. It felt like all the air was sucked out of the universe; and then screeching sirens. My mother turned on the radio and we heard that a bomb, a couple of bombs, were dropped on Warsaw and that we were at war, that Germany bombed Warsaw without declaring war.

But even when the first bomb was dropped on Warsaw, the true brutality of war seemed still unreal until that night. That night -- excuse me. That night we were awakened by a tremendous rumble of planes. And before I could lift my head from my bed, the sky lit up brilliant lights, like fireworks, and then bombs were dropped on us. And the bombs were raining on us. In one second I stopped being a child and took on the burden, the sad burden, of life.

Inside I remained a child. I am glad to report that from my experience children remain children at heart. And this is the wonderful and magical thing about children. Even under the worst of circumstances, when we played in bunkers and hid in alleyways, hidden from the sky, hidden from the world, we still pretended, we still held on to our inner selves and the magic of childhood. But there was still -- while we remain children, children are also excellent at multitasking. We also looked out to see if there was a soldier, a

Nazi soldier, in the neighborhood, to protect the family, to run home and to warn -- to hide contraband like books and bread.

So that night the sky opened up and bombs were raining on our heads. In spite of the fact that there was a lot of talk about the threat against us in Poland and in spite of all the horrid things that we heard happening with Nazi expansion, in spite of the fact that there were air raid drills, in spite of the fact that the city was strung with flags and posters flapping in the air, screaming "United, Prepared, and Ready!" It still came as a total surprise. So bombs dropped all around us. The buildings were crumbling. Buildings were going up in flames. There was not enough food. There was not enough water. The German military was so powerful that it swept through Poland in eight days.

>> Bill Benson: As you said, four weeks this went on.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Warsaw held out for a month. But you wrote in your book that once the siege was over and the German Army marched into Warsaw on October 1, 1939, you wrote, "Immediately my life changed beyond imagination." Tell us more about that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Immediately our lives changed beyond recognition. Our once peaceful streets were now patrolled by foreign soldiers. They shouted hatred and content. They snapped whips in our homes and streets. They walked into our homes saying that we Jewish people were greedy. But they walked into our homes like common thieves and helped themselves to whatever they wanted. They rationed food. They turned off electric power. We had no books. Schools were forbidden. Books were forbidden. They confiscated radios.

They confiscated all kinds of things and stopped newspapers. So we lived in virtual darkness, cut off from the world and from everything that was taking place.

>> Bill Benson: I think you told me that Jews were ordered to use whatever valuables they had to pay for the war blaming the Jews on starting this war.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. Now, I was a child but even a child recognizes that the adult's ability for cruelty and for -- for nonsense. It was so ridiculous.

>> Bill Benson: Even as a child you saw that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yeah. If you lose trust, if you're a child and you lose trust in adult, you have to hold on to something. So I guess I believed that there is cruelty in all of us and there is kindness in all of us. What helped me to hold on, focus on the kindness, was my community.

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, tell us a little bit about you had several cousins who fled to Russia.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: They would figure very importantly later on in your life. Tell us a little bit about them.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, the irony of it was that there was no place for the Jewish people to run. There was no place to go. And ironically, the Russians were the ones who left the borders open, so many people fled to Russia. Many of them ended up in Siberia but they didn't lose their life.

>> Bill Benson: We may hear more about them later.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: It wouldn't be long before all the Jews in Warsaw that hadn't fled, which was

the vast majority that hadn't, including your family, would be forced into what would become known as the Warsaw Ghetto. And you would be in there for the next three years. Tell us about that life in the Warsaw Ghetto.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, it did not take very long before they built a thick wall around us. Not only were we isolated, when the ghetto was established, it was a problem both for the Christians and Jewish people in Warsaw. Because the Christian people had to vacate the areas that were designated as the ghetto and find homes. And a very tiny part of -- I believe it was 1/3 of the city was only a few streets, was designated for 30%, I think -- I'm not sure that I am accurate, but I think 30% of the people lived in 3% of the area. We had to pay for building the wall.

Can you imagine to be encircled by a wall, how your horizon is cut off? They called it a ghetto. They filled the ghetto with Jewish people driven out from surrounding areas. Most of them came on foot. Many of them came without shoes, without a penny in their pockets. Little tots in the street with bare knees and bare feet cried and begged for food. There was not enough food. There was not enough housing. People lived in such crowded conditions. People were dying of hunger and starvation and the streets were littered with corpses. People covered the children's dead bodies with posters saying, "Our children are sacred. Our children must live."

But even in this inferno, the Jewish people in the ghetto immediately organized themselves into self-help centers. Immediately every building had a kitchen. Every building had a committee raising money and raising food and collecting clothes,

doing whatever one could to help out their starving neighbors. Guns hovering over our heads did not stop people for celebrating holidays. On Passover, in our building, there was Matzah in everyone's house.

To own a book was a capital punishment, a capital crime, capital punishment. Yet my father, he was not the only one, had had a favorite stash of his books by Yiddish writers, by Chaim Kaplan and Shalom Asch in Paris, nice windows blinded with covers to keep our existence secret.

My family sat in a dimly lit room. My father would pull out his books and read to us. His voice was flowing with swaddling comfort. Our home, our little home, felt like a capsule of paradise separating us from the deadly curfew, the quiet, outside our windows.

We had hidden school. Imagine the courage of the teachers, unemployed teachers, who were teaching children in cold rooms to hold on to their inner self and their faith and good and right.

We even had theaters. When we had no bread. Imagine theaters when there was no bread.

>> Bill Benson: All done in secret?

>> Estelle Laughlin: All done under -- it was defiant. It was capital crime.

>> Bill Benson: You quoted Chaim Kaplan.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: You know it better than I. It's an amazing thing to think about those words.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Thank you for reminding me of it. Chaim Kaplan was a remarkable historian. And he said that it is strange that when we don't seem to need it at all, we need poetry more than we need bread. And that is so true. When I was 11 years old or 12 years old, I did not appreciate yet the value of these things, yet these were the things that kept my soul alive; that kept my faith in humanity alive. And that is what sustained me all throughout the atrocity and still it's within me.

>> Bill Benson: You wrote, yourself, in your book, "It was a mitzvah to dance in defiance to Nazi brutality." Just say a little bit more.

>> Estelle Laughlin: That was during the holidays. We knew that celebrating holidays was taking a risk, a real risk, risking your life, your family.

>> Bill Benson: And a mitzvah, doing a good deed.

>> Estelle Laughlin: A mitzvah in Yiddish means a good deed. So we were just -- we would just pull the window shades down and we would celebrate the holidays. And even then, considering this to be a mitzvah, that was our moral resistance.

>> Bill Benson: Your father, as you've already said and indicated in several ways, thought participation in the arts was important even under those circumstances. But your mother, you wrote, was focused mostly on practical ways to survive. Say more about that and your mom.

>> Estelle Laughlin: My mother scrubbed, washed, cleaned, pounded the pillows to air them out. She was on a rampage to keep the house so clean of every Typhus germ. That was her way of protecting.

You see, my mother -- while the Holocaust, there was no match

to it but throughout history Jewish people were persecuted and they always managed to hold on through books, through learning, hold on to their culture through books, through learning.

And my mother experienced persecution also during World War I where she was driven out by the Cossacks from Shtetl, a little town in this Russia. And it is possible that her experience during that period when she was driven out and the cruelty of the Cossacks taught her as much about survival as the beauty of the country taught her to appreciate beauty. She would sing to us songs, and describe to us the meadows full of wild flowers. So she retained both. And most of all, I am proud that she retained that in spite of the cruelty that she suffered, she was a person full of compassion. And I'm very proud of that.

>> Bill Benson: I think we'll hear even more about that as we move on to what happened after that. During that time, how did you manage to find food? How were you able to eat and sustain life itself during that period?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, there was tremendous starvation in the ghetto and people were dying by the thousands. I already described how it was littered with dead people and how frightening it was to look at it as if for a child and to think that perhaps it is going to happen to us, too.

We were fortunate that our house remained in the area that was designated as the ghetto, so we still had our home. And if you had your home, you had pretty much a lot. My father was also a jeweler. And during the war, jewelry becomes the most stable currency. While there was starvation, there was the black market. The best smugglers in the ghetto were the children because they were small and were able to break through,

sometimes, through the wall and get to the other side. And there were people on the other side. And the German, the Nazis, soldiers, were lining their pockets -- there was a vigorous black market. The not normal became normal during the war. So the fact that we still had some jewelry and we lived in poverty but we did not starve but there was tremendous starvation around us.

>> Bill Benson: The Nazis began deporting large numbers in the concentration camps. For a substantial period of time your family was able to remain hidden from that. Tell us what that involved, what your parents were able to do to keep you from being deported during that period.

>> Estelle Laughlin: In July 1942, the month of my 13th birthday, things became even more gruesome. This was the beginning of the infamous Warsaw Ghetto deportation. At first we had no idea that that deportation meant that some people, Jewish people, were forced to write false letters -- excuse me -- to write false letters to families inviting them to join them in places where they were fed and sheltered. But, of course, it was a lie.

As a result, many people, destitute people, homeless people, hungry people who had very little options went to march to Umschlagplatz. Many people hid. People hid in the most outlandish places. We hid in cupboards, in drawers, in closets. We hid in mattresses and box springs. My family hid in a room. The door was obscured by a wardrobe.

So the while the deportations were carried out with 20th Century know-how and efficiency and stone-aged value. Imagine between July 1942 and September

1942, 99% of the Jewish children disappeared. Can you imagine a world without the sound of children, without the presence of grandmothers and grandfathers because children and old people were the first ones to disappear?

We never heard from the people who were yanked away from our lives. But some of the people came back and they told us about this horrific train ride to Treblinka. Can you imagine? People have mothers and fathers, children, taking mothers and children and people and shoving them into oven and turning them into ashes?

When that became known, the Jewish people began to organize themselves an armed resistance. But by then the ghetto was like a humungous cemetery. There was such silence. There was such quiet. The windows, you looked into the windows, it was like looking into gouged out eyes, nothing beyond them. The quiet, you could feel it crawl at you.

>> Bill Benson: You had written, as you mentioned, 99% of the children were taken. At some point the Nazis declared that any person under 14 was useless to them. You were 13. How did your parents react to that?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Children under 14 were contraband because they were considered unproductive. I was 13. I had braids. My mother cut off my hair. She dressed me into adult clothes. I asked my father, you know, I said, "Dad, what if they find out that I am only 13?" And my father said, "Well, I will never let them take you away from me. I'll burn their eyes out." You know, I knew better, but I believed him; that I was safe if only in his love.

>> Bill Benson: At some point during that period your family moved to a ground level

apartment.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: And that was all a very deliberate plan on your parents' part. Tell us what that meant.

>> Estelle Laughlin: As I mentioned -- I don't remember if I mentioned it. But some people who were sent to Treblinka managed somehow to hide under corpses. Somehow they managed to get back to the Warsaw Ghetto, to Treblinka. When this became known, the Jewish people prepared themselves for resistance and they started to build bunkers. And the bunkers were under the buildings.

Warsaw was an ancient city. Most people lived in apartment buildings. There were very few private homes. We were the only family in our building still alive. So we moved to the ground floor. My father was a member of the resistance, and we had a bunker, too. Our bunker had a secret trap door, all bunkers did. There was a network of bunkers built throughout portions of the ghetto that was for entrenchment and for hiding.

Also, the resistance fighters dug tunnels to leave from one bunker to the next. And they dug tunnels underneath the wall. And they also used sewers a lot to get arms from the Christian resistance, from the partisans.

So we had this bunker -- the entrance to our bunker was a secret trap door, which was the powder room, commode. It all lifted. Then you walked down a little ladder.

>> Bill Benson: Under the commode.

>> Estelle Laughlin: So this was to be -- this small basement was to be our universe, our world, netherland.

>> Bill Benson: And you, of course, there in the Warsaw Ghetto when the remarkable uprising occurred. And then, of course, the subsequent, just horrific obliteration of the ghetto.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: What caused the actual uprising? What was the event that precipitated the uprising?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, there were a couple of skirmishes in early 1943 between a few partisans and the Nazi forces. As a result, to punish the Jewish people for a couple of skirmishes, Hitler was promised to cleanse all of Warsaw, of the rest of the Jewish people. As a present to Hitler, a cleansed -- Warsaw cleansed -- a ghetto cleanse of Jews within three days.

>> Bill Benson: And that was to be a birthday gift.

>> Estelle Laughlin: A birthday gift. Right. Events erupted with Nazi soldiers coming into Warsaw with warplanes, with tanks, with the armored cars rolling down the streets and cars with humungous megaphones announcing we all were to report for resettlement or else they were going to tear us apart.

Of course, we disobeyed. We lifted our trap door and stepped down the ladder into a netherworld, pulled the trap door down. The walls closed in on me. The ceiling pressed down on me. The flickering of the carbide light was our substitute for the sun. The ticking of the clock was our only connection with the outside world. That was the

only clue we had when morning was rising, when sun was falling. How I craved for the open horizon, for the sky, for the blue crispness of day. The few people in the bunker with us were our whole nation.

>> Bill Benson: And while you were there, of course, this terrible uprising, conflict, going on above you. Tell us about that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: So while we were in the bunker fighting erupted above us. Imagine a group of poorly fed, poorly armed resistance fighters facing a 20th Century Army, armed from head to toe, lots of bomber planes, tanks. The resistance fighters stepped out in front of the tanks, crawled through the tunnels, crawled through the sewers, stepped up on top of roof tops, in front of open windows and lobbed Molotov cocktails and fire throwers, whatever they had in the fighting against this Army.

The remarkable thing about it and the noteworthy thing about it is that it took Poland and France less time to capitulate than it took the resistance fighters to fight even after Hitler declared the ghetto cleansed of Jews. The ghetto was bled white. The resistance fighters for weeks and weeks and months, the formidable skirmishes, they were hiding in the ruins because the ghetto was obliterated.

At some point a grenade was thrown at our trap door. Apparently they knew -- the Nazis somehow had some knowledge about some of the places people were hiding. They threw a grenade. At that point there was not a corner we could hide anymore. And they dragged us out into the street. Buildings were crumbling to our feet. The sky was black -- sky was black with bomber planes. The buildings crumbling to our feet.

Flames, enormous flames, licking the sky and painting it in other worldly colors of iridescence. The air was trembling with explosions. The ground -- people in congealed blood. I tried to yank my head away. I couldn't understand what death was. My biggest wish was that I would make the transition holding on to my parents' hands and my sister. They marched us to Umschlagplatz.

In the morning, my mother, my sister and I miraculously survived. We survived with compassion, with love for humanity and with joy for life. We survived where the crematory was, where the chimneys were spitting out smoke, smelling of human flesh, where our friends' bodies were dangling where they counted us daily.

>> Bill Benson: When did you last see your father?

>> Estelle Laughlin: The last time I saw my father was in Majdanek. Men, women, and children were torn away from one another. There were very few children, but they were kept in a small, enclosed area yammering, calling, "Mamma," "Tata." My father was sitting separate with the men on the muddy ground. My sister, my mother and I were sitting opposite the men. This is where we were gathered, were guarded by guards. My father pushed himself to be in the front row so that he could see us. Our eyes were locked.

My father was very ill at that point with TB. He was brittle. I could not stand the suffering I saw in his eyes. I was so used to looking into his face for comfort, for steadiness, for reassurance. When I noticed that the guards weren't watching, I dashed across the field and knelt in front of my father. And I said, "Tata, don't worry about me; you know they won't get me." And I flipped the lapel of my coat and showed him, “Remember,

I have cyanide." We had capsules of cyanide we used as a last resort. And my father looked at me and he said, "No, child. Don't use it. You must live." And that was the last time I saw my father.

By some fluke of circumstances, my mother, my sister and I were sent to other camps, to a slave labor camp.

You know, I'm very aware of sharing such very personal things. And I am just so grateful when I look around and I see the kind faces of all of you. I appreciate it so much. I want to kind of justify why I am sharing such cruelties and express so much I appreciate your intense faces. Because I'm doing it, and I think you're doing it, because we need to be reminded of the cruelties that human beings are capable of. And maybe in the moment that we perceive that cruelty we are so much more aware of the importance of love. This is why I feel that I need to justify and rationalize.

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, you and your mother and your sister, Fredka, would remain in Majdanek for about three months doing slave labor and that from there you would be forced to yet another camp to also do forced labor.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us where you were sent after Majdanek. And, of course, we're skipping over so much that occurred in that three-month period and the brutality there was unimaginable, but you would go from there on to another camp. What was that like?

>> Estelle Laughlin: It's a slight distinction or maybe not such a slight distinction between extermination camp and slave labor camp. Though I was told that Majdanek for some reason

is not termed an extermination camp, I call it an extermination camp because everyone I knew in Warsaw was gassed there. And any place that has an extermination oven in its place and uses the ovens to kill people to me is an extermination camp.

>> Bill Benson: And, of course, they took your father right away.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. And Skarzysko, also in Poland, was a slave labor camp. They were manufacturing arms for the Nazis.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us more -- I'm going to interrupt you. When you were on the train going from Majdanek to Skarzysko, if I remember correctly, the train stopped and an event occurred that really you think may have saved your lives.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, how did one survive? It was random luck. If 99% of children are scooped up, it's just like when you -- no matter how well you sweep, there will be some crumbs that will be left. So that is the random luck, but there was also a feistiness. In this situation, it was random luck.

When we were on the trains from Majdanek to Skarzysko, my sister had to go to the bathroom. The train stopped once. We were permitted to go to the pit stop. And my mother and I pleaded with my sister not to go because the soldiers were standing outside and shooting, just shooting just for the fun, just for the fun of it; not because they had to, just for the fun. But my sister just absolutely had to go. So we went out.

We never separated. We were like one organism. Love sustained us. One of the things that kept us alive was the fact that we had one another. And that was very rare. As far as I know, my mother was the only mother in the entire camp, to the

best of my knowledge. Most people were completely alone. We were the only family, that I know of, of three people.

So the when it was time to go back to the train, we went to a different car.

>> Bill Benson: By accident.

>> Estelle Laughlin: By accident because they were shooting. We were running. And when we arrived in Skarzysko, there were three branches in the concentration camp. One was where they were manufacturing gunpowder. And the people who went to that branch that manufactured the gunpowder, immediately their lungs and their skin, they didn't use any mask, any precaution and so they looked so ghoulish. Not only were they skeletal so most of them died. And had we stayed on that train, we would have ended up in that branch. But because we didn't, we ended up in another branch. We were sorting ammunition.

Skarzysko, while it was a slave labor camp, it was still encircled by electrified barbed wired fencing. There were still towers. There were still guards there with beams of light following every step we took. We hardly ever saw a flower, hardly ever saw a bird or a butterfly, hardly ever saw the sun. We worked for many, many hours. And most people died there of hunger and cold. It was terrible.

>> Bill Benson: That's Skarzysko. I know our time is running short. There's much more for you to tell us, but there's a couple of things I want you to share with us. It was at Skarzysko where you, Fredka, your sister and your mother, were referred to by your other fellow inmates -- you were referred to as the three monkeys.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: And you were actually going to use that in the title of your book. Explain that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: My -- of course, I leave out so many details. If you read my book, you will see -- you will find the details. You will also find the courage and the love that shines through human beings even in the darkest places.

My sister had Typhus in the camp. I describe in my book how my sister was isolated in the hospital and how my mother would trade her -- the slab of bread to try to help my sister. My sister did survive. They shaved her hair. My sister used to be so beautiful when she was a child. And in the camp she looked awful. Her hair was shaved. Her eyes were sunken. Her cheeks were sunken. She was like a walking skeleton. And we were the only family of three. Also, we recovered with lice and mange. And we looked like monkeys. So we would cuddle together and pick lice. So the people in our barracks affectionately called us, "Oh, here are the three monkeys."

>> Bill Benson: In the summer of 1944, you were forced again to move and this time to a concentration camp known as Czestochowa. Tell us a little bit about that because that would then lead, eventually, a long time off to your liberation. But tell us a little bit about that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Czestochowa was very much -- was also an ammunition factory, also owned by a German firm. It was very much like Skarzysko. Then a miracle, in January 1945 we hear a rumble of planes followed by bombardment. We lift our heads and we say, "Could it be after all of these years?" And the bombardment.

We were so isolated. We had no idea that only a few rabbit

hops away from us people were sailing on silver lakes, children were sitting around tables with their families. We had no idea if the allies were winning or losing. And here we hear the rumble of planes and we hear the bombardment. We say, oh, please, don't stop. We don't care if we die. Dying by an allied bomb would be such an honorable death. We were on that road. Well, we were liberated at the crack of dawn. And liberation, I assure you, was nothing like you are likely to imagine. And, of course, time does not allow me to talk about it.

>> Bill Benson: Take a moment, though, to describe when you realized that you were liberated, even if it wasn't the moment we like to think of and go, "Aha, I'm liberated," but tell us what happened.

>> Estelle Laughlin: What happened was the gates of paradise opened. As I described to you, all we had was a -- no underwear no gloves, no sweaters.

>> Bill Benson: This was an especially brutal winter. Right?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Poland -- it was the middle of January, and Poland is pretty cold. It was -- yeah, especially when you don't have proper coverage and wooden clogs. We shuffled out of the camp when we realized, the whole night -- how the liberation occurred is just too much for me to describe. But we shuffled out passed the electrified wires, outside fence, a no-man's land. Nothing moved. Nothing stirred. We shuffled through. We keep on going. Then we hear tanks and we hear voices of soldiers. And then, of course, we were afraid. What if these are German soldiers? But then we hear they are Russian soldiers. So we run to them teary-eyed, like messiahs, “Do you know how long we've been waiting for you? Nobody heard our cries. Nobody heard our pleas. Here you are.” And the soldiers put up a

hand and said, “Sorry, we have a war to fight.”

And, indeed, they did have a war to fight. And they looked at their watches and they said, “You better be careful and find shelter before curfew.” At that point I don't know if I was more afraid of dying of cold and starvation than being arrested for breaking the curfew and being put into prison again.

And we were so hungry. We went out into the streets. People looked at us. I want to believe there were people who looked at us with sympathy, but there were no DP camps, no help at all. But we encountered some people from the camp who told us down the street there is a factory, a pickle factory. So we climbed through the window. And our first meal was a dill pickle.

And you know? In my memory, I think that somebody offered us herring, pickled herring. And I don't know if it was wishful thinking or if it really happened.

So we did a lot of wandering after the war. A large part of my book is dedicated to the story of liberation because very little was written about it, particularly liberation in the Russian sectors because they were not as generous. And also, they were not as economically able. And also there was Stalin. I don't think we were very important to them. But eventually we came to the United States.

>> Bill Benson: With $30.

>> Estelle Laughlin: With $30 to this blessed land. For my sister and for me, to start life over again. We were young. Life still held out a big promise. It was like an unopened package yet for us.

For my mother, my poetic mother who in the concentration camp in front of the crematory would murmur in my ear, "Life is sacred. It's noble to fight to stay alive," was not able to start life over again. Not every survivor was able is to start again. But my mother was also somewhat of I prophet because in this concentration camp she also said to us, "Remember, if we survive, you'll see that the German people, that the children of the German people and their children's children for generations will be asking, where was your conscience?"

I don't know that I believed her then, but obviously I remembered it so I wanted to hear it. And my mother was right. Now all over Germany people are asking, how could it have happened? I am so grateful for that. I am ever so grateful for that. I feel that guilt and revenge is not the issue. I feel the responsibility is to understand. And I think that we are left with all of us -- all of us are left with a legacy to understand how could people do that. We are all human beings. We all share something. As long as people are saying that the Holocaust never happened, we have to question, we have to understand if civilization is to make any progress.

>> Bill Benson: I want to thank you for being our *First Person*. I'll turn back to Estelle to close our program. I want to thank all of you for spending this time with us. I think it's real apparent we could only just skim the surface ever so little. There's so much more to hear about. Fortunately Estelle has written a book, which is a good thing. And so after we're finished here, Estelle will go to the top. So if you're interested, just to say hi if nothing else but also an opportunity for Estelle to sign copies of her book.

We will have three more *First Person* programs tomorrow and then next Wednesday and Thursday and close our 2013 year of *First Person*, but we will resume again next March of 2014. So I hope you can at some point make plans to come back and join us.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last word. So on that note, I'll turn to Estelle to close it. When she finishes, I'm going to sort of try to get her to not linger so she can beat some of you out of the theater.

>> Estelle Laughlin: I want to thank you so very much for being here. Seldom are people willing to speak about such events or to listen to such events because they generate such pain. But we have to be reminded from time to time what can happen to our country, what can happen to the conscience of a nation, what can happen to love and trust when people accommodate themselves to brutality.

I am so grateful for this museum. It is proof that history always remembers and that we must listen if the world is to be a better place for all of us.

Thank you so much for being here.

[Applause]

[The presentation ended at 2:07 p.m.]