Thursday, April 17, 2014

11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
***FIRST PERSON* SERIES**
HALINA PEABODY

REMOTE CART

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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

First Person Halina Peabody

>> Bill Benson: Good afternoon and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson, host of the public program *First Person*. Thank you for joining us today. We are in our 15th year of the *First Person* program. Our *First Person* today is Mrs. Halina Peabody whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2014 season of *First Person* is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation with additional funding from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

First Person is a series. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue through mid-August. The Museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests. Anyone interested in keeping touch with the Museum and its programs can complete the Stay Connected card or speak with a museum representative at the back of the theater as you're leaving. In doing so you will receive an electronic copy of Halina Peabody's biography so you can remember and share her testimony.

Halina will share with us her experience during the Holocaust for about 45 minutes. If time allows at the end of our program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask Halina a few questions.

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

presentation to help with her introduction.

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

The arrow shows the location of Krakow. Halina was the daughter of Ignacy and Olga Litman. In this photograph we see Halina with her mother and her Aunt Irka in 1938.

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

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

Halina's mother decided the safest place to hide was in plain sight. She found a job at a German headquarters peeling potatoes for German troops. This is a photograph of Halina's mother 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 who lives in England, and the other just 10 minutes away as Halina notes. She has two granddaughters, Hannah, 16, Olivia, 10. Hannah will be producing a film about her grandmother for a school project.

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 went there to place a

monument on an unmarked grave in which 800 Jews were buried.

Halina continues her keen interest in sports which, you will hear later, have been a particular importance in her life because her mother was a Polish swimming champion in 1925. Last year Halina and her sister Eva traveled to Poland to visit an exhibit of Jewish athletes in Krakow which included her mother. She will also visit her family in England and Israel this year.

Halina speaks frequently about her experience during the Holocaust at schools as well as here at the museum and in other settings. With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mrs. Halina Peabody.

[Applause]

Halina, thank you for joining us and being willing to be our *First Person*. We have just an hour. We might even have two or three extra minutes because we started a bit early. You have so much to share with us. We're going to jump right in.

You told me that for your life was beautiful in your early years before Germany invaded Poland in September 1939 starting World War II. Let's start the conversation today with you telling us a little bit about your family, your community, and you before the war began.

>> Halina Peabody: As you mentioned, I was born in Krakow. However, we did not live there. My mother just went to her mother -- my mother. When she married, my father, a dentist, wanted to have a smaller town where he could start dental surgery. Krakow was full of that. So they moved to a place called Zaleszcyki. Today it's Ukraine. You saw the map. It's like -- it was like a riverside town. It was completely surrounded by water. Not completely

but about 90%. So you had kayaks, beaches. You could go from the shady beach to the sunny beach. My mother was very happy because she was a swimmer, so she loved the water. So she used to have a kayak. She used to water ski. I had a little paddle; used to kayak around. I had bicycles and tricycles. I was promised a grand piano from my grandparents as the first child.

My mother was also a wonderful knitter. She would knit not only wool but lace. And all our stuff at home was made out of her work. It was lacy curtains. We had all kinds of embroidery. She was very, very talented in that area. She used to knit little outfits for my Shirley Temple doll. Those are wonderful memories of those years that I had.

>> Bill Benson: Your mom, your mother and your father, taught you many skills very early in life. Will you say something about that?

>> Halina Peabody: I was just about to say. My mother taught me to embroider and to knit. I can't remember ever not knowing how to. It was all done before my many memories.

My father decided I had to be a genius, so I had to be able to read a paper before I went to kindergarten. So he taught me to read and write in Polish. I don't remember any of it. My mother used to tell me. But I don't remember that. All I knew, I've always known how to read and write in Polish to this day. So that really stood me in very good stead during the war.

>> Bill Benson: In September 1939, of course, all that would change when Germany invaded Poland from the west. The Soviets then invaded the part of Poland where you lived. And your town was soon under Russian occupation. It was initially thought that only the men were in danger, so many of them fled over a bridge into Romania. Your father had second thoughts.

Tell us about that.

>> Halina Peabody: The thought was that they were basing themselves on the First World War where the men were conscripted into the Russian Army, women and children were not touched. So my father, as many others, some with families, ran over because it was very easy to go to Romania. You just crossed over a bridge. So a lot of people went, including my father. He was not wanting to take us because my sister was born two months before the war. So there was a baby at home. So he didn't feel that he could take a family, wondering about if there would be milk for her and what kind of conditions.

So in the rush, they all rushed over. We stayed back home. The Russians occupied us. I was not quite 7 years old, so I don't remember all the details. I don't remember the Russians so well that time. But I knew that my father -- we lost a father because he left.

However, about some weeks later -- the weather in Zaleszcyki was very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter. So in the winter the river was completely solid and you could just walk over it. And that's what these people who decided to come back, they decided to cross back. And my father was one of them. After all, they left businesses and families and children. So they decided, you know, maybe things have settled down. They just tried to cross back. However, the Russians sealed the border by then. They were all caught. My father was put on trial. They said he was a spy. A dentist, a spy? Yeah. Well, because he went back and forth. That's why they said he was a spy. They gave him 20 years' hard labor. My mother went to say goodbye to him, and that was the last time we saw him. He was taken away. He was sent to Siberia.

We had little correspondence with him but not much afterwards. We, as a family of a criminal -- my father was called a criminal because he was sentenced, so the family under the Russian law, we were supposed to be also taken to Russia. And we were all packed, ready to go. But for some reason, never found out why they didn't take us. Somebody spoke up for us or something. Anyway, we were not sent to Russia. At that time we thought we were saved. However, we were thrown out of the house. We had to move up the road. There was another little town called Tluste where we spent the Russian occupation.

>> Bill Benson: Were any of your other relatives taken to Siberia during that same time?

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. My two aunts, one from Warsaw, one from Krakow, came to our area, to our house in 1939, when the war broke out because they were more afraid of the German occupation than the Russian occupation. So they came over to us. At one point the Russians offered them a deal. They said you can go back to the German side, and as with my father's group, you know, they decided that it was time to go back, everything was sort of settled in. So they left businesses and homes, so they wanted to go back. So they signed up.

As usually with the Russian offers, it was a ruse. One of my aunts was not feeling well, was sick. And for some reason the Russian was nice and left her with her husband. She -- my other aunt, my cousin and my uncle, were taken to Russia. They have -- they had a very hard time in Siberia but did survive there.

>> Bill Benson: So remaining cost her her life.

>> Halina Peabody: And could have cost ours, too.

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely. You could have been sent to Siberia as well.

>> Halina Peabody: We were supposed to be. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely. To the extent you know, what was life like while under the Russian occupation? Your father's gone. Livelihood is gone.

>> Halina Peabody: Right. The children were dropped one class. So instead of going to kindergarten, I went to some little, you know, like one class below. What they wanted to do was to teach us Russian and to teach us the Communist mantra. So I remember going to school a little bit and learning Russian. Very vaguely, but I do remember that they tried to teach us. They tried to bring Communism into our midst. As I said, at that age, you didn't really have a big impact on me. I enjoyed their singing, though. The Army used to sing beautifully.

>> Bill Benson: You were about 8 1/2 when the Germans turned on the Russians and quickly, swiftly, came and occupied your town. Then, of course, things turned dramatically worse.

>> Halina Peabody: First of all, when the Germans came to us, the Russians just disappeared. They left. And we went back to our house. So we settled back into Zaleszcyki, into our house. We awaited the next occupants. Nobody knew what to expect. Everybody was obviously very tense. My poor mother had this baby. She was having trouble feeding her. There was no visible means of any income either as well. I don't know what we lived on all of those months. Friends, we had good friends. I think that they helped mostly.

We were waiting, just wanting to cooperate as best as we could. When the Germans arrived, they put in all of those new rules. No schools for Jewish children, first of all. There was a curfew. They told us that we must put yellow stars, yellow arm bands. Everybody was

very, very scared, I have to say. We didn't go out if we didn't have to.

The fact was that we, as I said, we all wanted to cooperate. I know that they said that every Jewish person had to be working for the Germans. So it didn't matter if there was no particular job for them. They were told to clean the sidewalks, to that extent.

As I said, my mother -- they knew everything about everybody. My mother was a knitter. So they made her the chief knitter for the mayor of the town, the German, of course, because he had lots of children. So my mother was knitting for his children. And everybody else was working for the Germans.

>> Bill Benson: There was this terrible incidence where young men and women were taken to the woods. Will you tell us about that?

>> Halina Peabody: That was next. They created a Jewish leadership group there, The leaders of the Jewish community. They worked through them, whatever they needed. They used to get groups of people to go out to work for them in the farm country. So they had all kinds of jobs to do. And they would take a group of young people to do some jobs. In the evening they would come back.

As I said, we were all working and hoping for the best. Then they demanded a big group of volunteers to go up. They were supposed to be binding trees for the winter. Winter was very harsh so nobody had any suspicions.

>> Bill Benson: To wrap bags around the trees?

>> Halina Peabody: Burlap around the trunks of the trees so they wouldn't die in the cold. A lot of people went, even volunteered. They were marched up the road. The place they were

supposed to do this job was an old military, Polish military, camp; just up the road, out of sight of the town. They were marched up. Whoever they found on the way, they marched, they added, and they were marched up.

We waited for them to come back as normally you would. Nobody was coming back. We waited. We waited. We were anxious. Finally, towards the evening, a man dragged himself back in. He told what happened. He was the only survivor of that group. What happened was that he was shot, but they missed his heart. They hit his arm. He told us that when the group got there, they found an open grave over which there were planks of wood. They were told to undress and lay over those planks. And they were shot. As they were shot, they were dropping into the grave and this man who survived was one of the last people to fall in. As I said, they missed his heart. They didn't cover them very well. They didn't have to. They didn't care. So he managed to drag himself out and came back and told the story. And that's when we found out, when we realized, what was happening. Because up to this point we were cooperating; we thought we were being just occupied. But then we wondered what was in store for everybody.

>> Bill Benson: In addition to the day-to-day brutality of the Germans they would do these periodic aktions. And there were several of them. There was one that I think was of a very close call for you in which your mother --

>> Halina Peabody: That was later, much later. Let me first say what happened to the next one because we were all waiting to see what was going to be the next.

What happened was when the order came, the next one, they needed a certain

number of people to work in Germany. Again, that could have been true because they needed people to work in Germany, but we already knew that this may not be true. Everybody tried to hide. My mother took both my sister and me to our cook, the lady who used to come and cook for us. That's where we spent the day. That's how we survived that day. They got the right number of people. And then we went back home.

And at that point the Germans decided that this was a small Jewish community so there weren't that many of us left. They did not want to have to drag and look for us. So what they did is they threw all the Jews out of Zaleszcyki, the rest of the Jewish community, and threw us into the same town that we were during the Russian occupation, to Tluste. And there we found not only the remnants of our Jewish community, but the remnants of the communities around us where they did the same thing. And whatever was left, they didn't want to have the trouble, so they put us all together into this Tluste. We had a sort of communal homes. It turned into a ghetto later. Right then it was just a group of people living together in close quarters. It was a Jewish quarter.

Again, first thing they started doing was looking for hiding places because we already knew that the next thing is going to be, again, they'll need to take us out again. My mother said to me that it's not going to help because they're going to move us again. That's the whole pattern. They will kill as many as they can, and then they'll move us together again. So we would lose the hiding places. She started looking for ways to get out and to save us, the children. But, of course, there was no way. During this whole time she tried to send to Romania. Nothing worked.

Before she had a chance to look for anything else, though, another order came that they needed a group of people to be sent to Germany for work. Of course, everybody was ready with the hiding places. My mother did not want to hide under the house. She had met a couple of farmers. She had known a couple from the previous trip. So she decided to hide with two farmers. She put me in one loft there with one farmer and in the other one she paid the lady in advance to keep her and my sister during the day while they were looking for people to collect.

So all day long I wondered, you know, what's happening to my mother. The lady hiding me said they were collecting them in the square, that she saw this person. I knew everybody. This friend, that friend was there. I kept thinking my mother was caught. And that's how I stayed all day because I was sure my mother was caught.

Towards the end of the day, however, my mother did come to pick me up with my sister. She told me what happened to her. The lady who kept her just got nervous and scared. She threw her out of the house with my sister in the middle of the day. She said there was an empty field with one bush. She crouched by this bush with my sister for the rest of the day while they were looking for stragglers. She said it was a miracle they didn't see them because they were with airplanes and -- you know, looking around for people. And somehow, as I said, some miracle, they didn't see them.

At the end of the day, my mother, as I said, when she came to pick me up, she thought I was taken. She was convinced that I was caught. So we both went through this. And she said: We're not going to do this again. We're going to stay together. And whatever

happens to us, we will go together. And that was her decision.

Of course, we knew that this was not the end of the story. So she started again looking for ways what could she do. And they came up with this idea that since we were all women, that if we could get papers, false papers, that maybe we had a chance to survive.

>> Bill Benson: Before you talk about that stage when your mother did that, wasn't there also a point where your mother prepared to have you go with your younger sister --

>> Halina Peabody: To Romania.

>> Bill Benson: You were so young. She was giving you instructions on how to care for your sister. That must have been so painful. Tell us about that.

>> Halina Peabody: Well, that was when she was trying to get us out. There was some night trips to Romania. She was explaining to me to wash the hair, keep it clean. I was just so upset because I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to go. If my mother said do this, I listened. In the end it didn't work out. I was relieved.

>> Bill Benson: So she tried everything.

>> Halina Peabody: She tried everything.

>> Bill Benson: And finally decided she had to get new identities for you.

>> Halina Peabody: That was the option that it came to. So they got the papers from the priest. With the help of our friends, again, they took us to the station and put us on the train. My mother decided that we would go to a place called Jaroslaw. Jaroslaw was a little bit bigger than Tluste and sort of on the way to Krakow. I don't know the reason, again, for that town, but that was what they decided to do and we said goodbye to everybody.

This was going to be a long trip. It was wartime, and the trains were not very comfortable. We're going to be four days and four nights with changes. My mother was carrying my sister. We had two suitcases, which was all we had left of our possessions, and we started on our trip; made ourselves home on the train, sat down.

As we were traveling, a young man attached himself to us and started talking. On the train people talk. Just sat next to us and started talking to my mother about the children. Altogether very friendly and chatty.

As soon as the train went on, my mother told me that he kept pushing and pushing her because he kept asking about the Jewish -- you know, if your great grandfather was Jewish, it was enough; you were Jewish. But he pushed her so hard she said she couldn't take it anymore. So she admitted that we were Jewish. And at this point he said, well, I'm going to Jaroslaw, too. I'm going to accompany you, but when we get there I have to turn you over to the Gestapo, of course. My mother understood that. That's how we started traveling, knowing that when we get to Jaroslaw, we're going to be turned over to the Gestapo.

I know that my mother was mostly concerned about the suffering of the children. She knew that we would be separated and taken away. This was her worst nightmare. She didn't care at all for herself. She would have let herself be quartered like any mother would, but she just didn't know what else could she do.

So as we were traveling, she was thinking when we get to the Gestapo, could they just shoot us all together immediately because I don't want to be parted from my children. And she offered them the tickets for the suitcases and the coats that you saw on our backs. Because

she said that was the thing -- that was the best she could figure out what to do.

And that's how we traveled, four days and four nights. It was very, very exhausting, as you can imagine. We were full of lice. If you put a comb through my hair, you had lice. And the clothes were full of lice. As we were traveling, he was looking after us very carefully. He always had my sister and me in his sights. And eventually my mother told me what she decided and what she asked him to do.

So when we reached Jaroslaw, we were completely exhausted, as you can imagine, four days and four nights on the train. It was terrible. But as we were coming down from the train, I suddenly realized that he was going to take us to the Gestapo to be shot. I didn't want that. Simple as that. I started thinking I don't want to die. And as we were walking to the Gestapo, I started pulling at my mother and saying, "I don't want to die." And she said to him: Look, you know, she's blond, young, maybe she would be able to survive by herself. Why don't you let her go? And I said,"No, I don't want to go by myself. I want you to come, too." So we keep walking, walking towards the Gestapo.

At that point, as I said, I was pulling at her. She didn't know what to do. And finally she said to him: Look, do you have children of your own?" And he said yes. And she said to him, "Why do you want this on your conscious? I've given you everything we have. Just take it. Just let us go and try our luck." And he did. And this was something that was one of those miracles that happened. We had a few of them, but this was the one of them.

>> Bill Benson: And Halina, having just now escaped that very, very scary situation, you had false papers as Catholics, but it was more than having false papers; you had to assume a new

identity as kids. How did your mother prepare you to become something you were not so that you could pass any interrogations; that you could pass for what you were not?

>> Halina Peabody: First of all, my sister was too young. She didn't know anything. We didn't tell her anything. Secondly, I was a kid as well. My mother did sit me down and told me, before we left, my new name, my grandparents, my birth date. I knew all of that. I had very scant knowledge about the church. We didn't attend synagogue, either, so I had nothing to base myself on. But I knew I had to cross myself in and out. I think that's all I knew.

Well, we didn't know anything more. I also didn't have anybody to ask because once we left, you know, we were on our own. I guess it was just living in hope. We did not know if the papers were real or not. To this day -- they are here in this museum, but I don't know if those papers were real or not. They didn't have computers those days to check.

>> Bill Benson: So that person's name may not have existed.

>> Halina Peabody: Or maybe he was --

>> Bill Benson: Nearby. So here you are in this new town with no money.

>> Halina Peabody: No money, no nothing; just my mother carrying my sister and had me by the hand. We're walking in the main street. My mother sees a little cafe. She walks into the cafe. He had left a few munze for my sister's milk.

>> Bill Benson: A few coins.

>> Halina Peabody: It was like a few dollars. Paper money. I think they were also in coins. Anyway, so we walk in there. My mother asked for the milk for my sister. We sit down. She started looking around. She asks if there was anybody who knew of a place where we could

find lodgings for the night. Because we needed to be somewhere inside. It was very important not to be straggling around the streets because there were Germans going around with guns at the ready. Didn't need much to just pull the trigger.

At any rate, one man got up and said that he knew a lady, a washer woman, who took lodgers in. He said he would be glad to just take us over there. It was very close by. He brought us over there. The lady, a tiny little lady, very sweet, she looked at us. We were bedraggled from the trip, mother and two kids. She says she'll take us in. Her son said, "Don't take her in. Don't." He had suspicions. But she said, no, she said, "This is a mother and two children. I have to take her in." Another one of those miracles.

So she took us in. My mother said: Look, I have no money, nothing but the next day, tomorrow, I will go to work. I will find some job. Whatever I earn, I'll bring to you for keeping us. And that's what she did. She took a few other jobs. She did housekeeping wherever she could. She changed jobs a few times.

She was very worried about a few things. My sister was very sickly. We had to leave her -- she had to go to work. My sister had very curly hair. That's very lovely, but it's an afro. And in Poland the girls have straight, blond hair. So if you had curly hair, that really meant that you're Jewish. The Pols were very good at recognizing Jews. She was terrified somebody would point. So that was one -- at one point she just shaved off her hair completely.

Excuse me.

>> Bill Benson: Shaved off her hair to avoid even having to deal with the issue.

>> Halina Peabody: Exactly. She did it twice.

I went to school -- Polish kids were allowed to go to two hours of school. I had one hour of religion, and one hour of general studies. Now, this is where I learned a little bit about the church.

>> Bill Benson: Because you had an hour of religious study every day.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. The way they taught Catholic religion was by catechism. They don't do it today, I don't think. But you had questions and answers. And because I could read and write, so I caught up pretty quickly. So I was one of the star pupils for the priests.

Of course, I had to be terribly careful because anything could have given me away. We didn't have a slip of paper, nothing. But still, you know, you could just give yourself away very easily. So I had to be very much careful not to do that.

My mother and I were two little partners. We were the only two that knew who we were, so we had to always be very careful how we communicated. My mother kept worrying about, very much, about the fact that we could be given away on any little thing. So this was the daily routine that we worried about whether we said something or did something. You know, anything like that, that could have given us away.

I was sent to a guy who was partially German across the street, a volunteer, to help him. Because he was partially German, he had right to have free labor. And my mother told him that I could darn socks. So I was sent over there. I helped him with peeling some potatoes or something in the kitchen, just a little helper there.

The lady who kept us was very good at teaching us, me, how to live. She taught me a lot of things, a lot of things. She was a very nice lady. I don't know whether she suspected or

not. They never asked us. It's only lately that I've been thinking that maybe she did suspect. I think what they thought is maybe my father is Jewish or something like that. But as I said, they never asked.

>> Bill Benson: There was one incident, however, where the home was raided where you were staying.

>> Halina Peabody: That was afterwards. Yes. My mother in her search for security changed the jobs a few times. At one point she offered herself to work in Germany because that would have been safer in that the Germans needed people to work as Pols. Not slave labor, just working for the Germans. But they didn't take us because my sister was too young.

So the next thing she did, she decided -- again, as I said, it was security. All the time she was worried. So she decided to apply for a job in this military camp, a German military camp. She wanted to have an ID to say that she works for the Germans, that this was the thing. Because the Germans, if you worked for them, they were -- they wouldn't question, wouldn't take you into the station. If you worked for them, you were let go. They would catch you. They would ask for papers. But if you showed that you were working, they would let you go. Mostly.

The thing was that one of the sons of the hostesses did a terrible thing. He killed pigs for a living. Under the German law, the Pols, or no Pols, they were not allowed to do that. Meat was a no-no. They were not allowed to slaughter pigs. They were always looking for him. They never found him. But they were looking for him always. So my mother decided to apply to the German military camp to get this ID that she felt would be a little safer.

Now, during this time we had one letter from our friends that we left behind with very interesting news. This was also rather dangerous to get a letter from somewhere, but this was too important that I think our friends felt we needed to know this. My father sent a telegram through the Red Cross that he was safe with his sister in Palestine. We knew there was a part of the family in Palestine. In those days it was all under the British mandate. My aunt and four children and my uncle, they went to Palestine in 1932. But we knew very little about it. We didn't even know which town they were in but by saying that us, we knew he was out of Russia and he was somebody that we could possibly, if we ever survived, somebody to get us out of Poland. So we had that information and it gave us a little bit of a lift.

Then my mother, as I said, applied to the German military camp. They told her they have to check the documents. Again, we lived in fear for weeks. I don't know whether they checked or not, but in the end it came through. So she had an ID which shows that she works for the Germans. And that's how we spent the rest of that occupation of Germany.

In the meantime, we did get raided by the Germans one night, as you were mentioning. What they did is they come in the middle of the night screaming, yelling with guns. "Open the door." They came in. "Everybody out." They took everybody from the house to the station to check them out. My mother showed her ID, looked at it and said, "No, no, you stay." The rest were taken into the station. They were checked out. They all checked out. So the next morning they came back, but we avoided being checked because this was the one fear.

>> Bill Benson: As you pointed out to me the great irony, unknown to them, those that were Jewish were left alone.

And they did not apprehend the son who was doing all of this illegal activity?

>> Halina Peabody: No. They never did find him.

>> Bill Benson: You, your mother and sister would live under these circumstances in constant fear but remain undetected. Your mother worked at the German headquarters for the balance of the war. As the Russians advanced on Jaroslaw, where you were living --

>> Halina Peabody: Which we didn't know anything about because we had no papers or radios.

>> Bill Benson: Your first knowledge, there's this fierce fighting going on around you. Go ahead.

>> Halina Peabody: No. No. The thing is we didn't know anything that was going on at all. What happened was one morning we woke up and there was complete silence in the street. Now, this is a main street where the horse and carts would go back and forth from early, early morning because the farmers would bring contingents and would just go back and forth. So we were used to the noise. My mother was still in bed, was getting ready to go to work. Suddenly there's this silence. We had no idea what was happening.

Out of this silence I was standing by my mother's bed. I was up, standing by my mother's bed. Suddenly there was a tremendous bang. Everything went black. I started screaming, "My hand, my hand." My mother got up, grabbed me by the hand. We grabbed my sister. We walked out -- we walked through the kitchen into the street. The kitchen roof had fallen down. You saw the house there. It was just a roof. It was a thatch roof at that time. It fell in. We walked out. My hand was bleeding. My mother tried to find somebody to take me

to the hospital, which was nearby, but nobody was there. So she walked and took me by the happened to the hospital. And in the hospital we learned that the Germans probably had run out and that the Russians were coming in. And there was fighting then. What we had was an artillery in the hospital. They were trying to get the planes down.

>> Bill Benson: You think it was a grenade or something that hit your house?

>> Halina Peabody: They thought it was a bomb. I don't know. I was hit by shrapnel.

>> Bill Benson: And you were badly injured.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: How did you get treatment?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, the hospital was very good about this. They told my mother, though, because of all the dirt and it was an open wound they would have to amputate my hand. So you can imagine my mother. She was completely devastated. I can't even mention it.

They took me in. They cleaned me up. What they eventually did is they managed to save my hand. The nurses were nuns, Catholic nuns. They were beautiful. They had the big white hats, you know, and the black. We used to play this game with my mother. One was really beautiful. They had little blond hair coming out here. They were very, very nice. They worked very hard saving my hand. I was in the hospital for two months. My hand, they had to straighten out my hand. They had to burn it live because there was no penicillin. They had to cauterize it. It was pretty painful. My mother used to run for miles not to hear me scream. And the nun would say to me, “Put your head in my habit and just yell.”

>> Bill Benson: There were no painkillers available.

>> Halina Peabody: They did, but it wasn't something they had. It was inflicted by the fact that they had to do it.

>> Bill Benson: Right. If I remember correctly, in the house, the woman who had taken you in --

>> Halina Peabody: We found out that she was under the roof in the kitchen. She was killed at that time. So we lost her. We couldn't go back there. There was nothing we could use there, so the neighbor took us in. I spent, as I said, two months in the hospital. The neighbor took us in. My mother kept going back and forth to the hospital.

I said to my mother, “Well, now, I can at least say my name.” And she said no, I can't. And I said, "Why?" And she explained to me that there was a Pogrom, where a few Jewish people that came out of hiding got killed by the Pols. I'm not saying all the Pols were bad, but that was my experience. I had to keep quiet as long as I was there. The lady, the neighbor who took us in, her son said that Hitler didn't finish his job. Yes. So.

My mother started knitting again to earn a little bit of money so that she could put announcements to look for my father. Eventually we did find him. But in the meantime my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. The doctor asked me to help decide to have the operation. They did not have any way to make sure that it was, but they said, you know, we don't want to see you orphaned. So they asked her to have it and she did have the operation.

We did find my father in the end. He sent my cousin from Palestine. In those days it was Palestine. My cousin came and put us in touch with a Jewish agency. We went from

there to near Krakow. And then from Krakow we registered with the Jewish agency. And eventually we went to Berlin. And then my father -- turned out that he was with the Polish unit that came out of Russia legally after Stalin allowed some political prisoners out. It was General Anders who was asked to create a unit. He was stationed in Egypt. He was -- being a dentist, he was a medical officer for the whole unit. He had the right, as part of the British Army, to go to England after the war. So that's how we ended up going to England.

>> Bill Benson: Before we talk about that, you also had this, if I remember correctly, this very ironic situation where you were accused of being Pols posing as Jews in order to get out.

[Laughter]

Yes.

>> Halina Peabody: We did. Because we were in a group of Jews. We had no papers whatsoever. Of course, there were people who said -- who thought we were -- the Polish people wanted to get out. And the only people they were letting out, semi, semi-officially, were the Jews. They had some agreement. So they said, oh, no, you're Polish trying to pretend to be Jewish. I know my mother said, “My husband's name is Izak.” And somebody sided because they knew the family. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: At what point did your mom feel it was safe to drop the false identity as Catholics and be yourselves?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, when we were with the group we did.

>> Bill Benson: At that point she said it's ok. Did it have any impact on your sister?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, my sister didn't know she was Jewish. When my cousin came from

Palestine, she looked at him. And as I said, the Polish people are very good at recognizing Jewish people. She looked at him and she said, “Ari, you're a nice guy but you're Jewish.”

[Laughter]

So he said, "Yes, but so are you."

[Laughter]

And she said, "No, I am not; absolutely not." Yes. Unfortunately that was the situation. But eventually we managed to get her out.

>> Bill Benson: Once you were able to reunite with your father -- of course, you told us a little bit about the fact that he survived Siberia when the Soviets and Germans went to war. They were released. He could join Anders' Army under the British flag. What was it like for you to reunite with your father? Here you've really been in this extraordinary world with your mom where she's protected you and saved you. You were her companion, little sister. What was that like for you?

>> Halina Peabody: It was complicated. I had to learn a new language, a new culture. It was very complicated for me. I knew how to read and write. And suddenly I looked and I couldn't read. English didn't fit into my knowledge. My mother said I couldn't go to a Polish school because she said there wasn't one. I was anxious to go to Polish school because I knew so much more than the other kids. But my mother said, “No, no, no, you're now living in England. You have to go to an English school.” So she insisted on my going to an English school. She said get on with it. You know?

>> Bill Benson: Your mother is an amazing woman.

>> Halina Peabody: My mother was. She was very good. She passed on a lot of good things to me.

>> Bill Benson: She sure did.

>> Halina Peabody: When I said to her, "We owe you so much, Mom, for what you did for us." She said, "No, no, you don't owe me anything." She said, "What I gave you, you give to your children."

>> Bill Benson: Here you are in England establishing a new life.

>> Halina Peabody: Very frustrated. I take up table tennis because tennis was not available. Table tennis was very good because I could hit that ball. I started in college.

>> Bill Benson: And only needed one hand. Right?

>> Halina Peabody: That's correct.

>> Bill Benson: You also told me you were painfully self-conscious about the --

>> Halina Peabody: Of course. Fact is, when you're playing a game and playing a sport or anything like that, you can't think of your hand. You just look at that ball. So that was a very good thing for me.

As I said, it had a lot of good things. I had company. When we moved to London, I found out that the Maccabiah, a Jewish youth club, was right around the corner. So I went. I think I spent every evening there. I worked during the day. I played table tennis in the evening. Really was a very good thing to do because the weather didn't matter. In England it was always raining; very few occasions that I could play tennis, which we did a little bit but mostly it was table tennis.

And that gave me a wonderful trip eventually to Israel. Back then Israel was created and they had the Maccabiah Games. And the Maccabiah Games were like the Jewish Olympics where you had people, Jewish youth, coming from all over the world every four years. And in 1953 I had the honor to represent England in the Maccabiah Games. Yes. It was the most wonderful trip for me. I think it gave me my soul back, I always say, to be there and to see a Jewish country. After being thrown out of everywhere it gave me a feeling of belonging.

Even though, I went back to England because I knew that my mother needed us. She was very ill. She was not well. She had ruined her health. She was very worried about my sister. Recovered eventually. So I went back.

In 1957, the next Maccabiah came around; I went back again to Israel. And I stayed in Israel for quite a few years, working at the American Embassy in Tel Aviv. That's why I'm in the states. I know that a lot of people were dreaming of coming to the United States. I never had that dream. I didn't know anything about the United States. But having worked there, I got married there and I had a son already. My husband and I applied very quietly for the last quotas to come just for a year to the United States. And that was in 1968. And I have been here ever since. I think enough traveling.

>> Bill Benson: Halina, as you said, your mother wasn't well. How were her remaining years?

>> Halina Peabody: Very, very hard.

>> Bill Benson: Very hard.

>> Halina Peabody: Very hard. Because they were looking for the cancer but they never

found it. They had the x-ray. They didn't have what they have today. I think she could have probably lived longer, but she passed away 1956.

That's why 1957 I stayed in Israel. I brought my sister over as well. So my sister went back to England where she still lives. As I said, I traveled to the United States. When I retired, I decided I needed to volunteer. And my best -- I found the fit was here, the Holocaust Museum.

So I've been here well over 10 years. Eventually they had me tell my story, which I never did before. I do it because I feel it's very, very important. I know the remarks I hear from people, especially from young kids, that when they hear a story told by an eyewitness that it makes it much more real. Books are one thing, but when somebody says the real experience of one person, it makes it more real for them.

That's why I'm very grateful to the museum for giving me this opportunity. I'm always willing to talk. We have a Speaker's Bureau here. Schools come over. We have groups from all over. Travel if necessary. That's my goal in life now. It's very nice to be of use at this point in my life.

>> Bill Benson: Halina, we're going to have time for our audience to ask you a couple of questions, but I want to ask you one more. You've been back to your former town of Zaleszcyki, first with Richard, your husband, and then more recently with other survivors, I believe, from Zaleszcyki. You said those trips were really remarkable. Tell us a little bit about those.

>> Halina Peabody: They were very remarkable. First time we found out that our house was

destroyed. There was nothing left. That was one thing. Didn't spend very much time at that time. But the second trip was with some people from my hometown. I was too young to remember anybody, but I found somebody through here and they remembered me.

>> Bill Benson: From your same town?

>> Halina Peabody: Yes, from Zaleszcyki. And there were other people. So we collected money and we went back there to place a monument on that unmarked grave. There was absolutely nothing on it. We knew there were so many people laying there. Names we didn't know. A few they knew, but I just remember --

>> Bill Benson: From that incident you described to us earlier.

>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. That they killed so many people there.

And my second trip, last May, was much more meaningful also because that was about my mother. I had been looking forever for her. I knew she was the champion. Of course, we had nothing. She couldn't keep anything. She had a beautiful gold statuette of a swimmer and the four-leaf clover that she used to show me. That was, of course, gone.

I didn't know who to ask. I asked around. I contacted the sports people there in Krakow and Warsaw. Nobody knew. It was too far back. But somehow, finally, it came to light. I was able to go and take my sister with me. We attended an exhibit of Jewish sports people from Krakow. It was an exhibit which is now traveling around where she's recognized and remembered. That was really something that meant a lot to me.

>> Bill Benson: Halina showed me a great big picture there of her mother as the Polish swimming champion. So recognition after all of these years of what she and many other

Jewish athletes accomplished.

>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. Some of them went to the Olympics, had Olympic medals.

>> Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: We have time for a couple of questions from our audience. We have microphones. So we'd like you to use the microphone if you can. That helps us hear the question up here. If need be, I'll repeat the questions to be sure that Halina hears it. Try to make them as brief as you can. Then Halina will respond to the question.

We can get a couple of questions, I think. We have one right here in the middle. Here comes the microphone coming down to you.

>> Thank you so much for sharing with us. You mentioned a couple of times that your family before the war and now were not observant of the faith. I wondered, because you've met so many other survivors, what the average effect was on their religious beliefs before the war, the effects on them, and how they felt afterwards about their faith. Did it affect their faith?

>> Bill Benson: Maybe make it personal to you.

>> Halina Peabody: Well, no, I have to say that I must speak for myself rather than for the others. Some people had definite concerns, you know. My mother explained it to me when I was very young so that -- she saw that I was very much taken into the church. I went to church. I went to the communion. And she was really concerned about whether I was being slightly -- becoming Catholic maybe later on. And what she said to me was, "We all pray to the same God, but we do it through different religions and you should stay with the one you were born in." So I never had any problems with religion. And we continued not being observant.

We didn't have much reason to.

My mother came from a very liberal family. My grandfather used to take his hat off in front of church when he walked by because he said every religion should be respected. He brought his family into Krakow, sent his children, including my mother to Polish schools, which, again, was very helpful because she spoke such beautiful Polish. And she didn't have the Jewish accent. This all helped during the war.

So we didn't have any conflict. To this day I have no conflicts. All our children are intermarried. That's because we don't live in a Jewish country. If I had lived in Israel, I would have been married to a Jewish man. But here not necessarily so. I know some people had conflict, but I did not. Luckily that one conflict I didn't have.

>> Bill Benson: Do we have another question? Right back here.

>> Very touching story. I really appreciate you sharing this.

As you were telling your story, you mentioned about a lot of people helping. I'm just curious. People, they didn't have to but they took a lot of risk and they continued to help you. You did mention them as they were miracles. Right? So even as people -- why would they do it? Why would they risk their own lives and support someone like you? First part. And you mentioned the church falsifying your religion, probably a big deal at that point of time. What were the Germans doing? People would come to know that, hey, there's somebody doing this. It's illegal. Would they not know about this and crack on all of these?

>> Bill Benson: Two parts. One is those that took the risk, those who helped you along the way, why would they do that with such risk? And what would happen to them if the Germans

had known? If I'm capturing that correctly.

>> Halina Peabody: The first part was why would they do it. First of all, they didn't know we were Jewish. Nobody knew we were Jewish. I have a feeling maybe they suspected. But if they had asked, I might have said yes, they might have, you know, been in danger. But they couldn't check us. They didn't know we were Jewish.

Yes, the families, if they were caught helping a Jew, they were in great danger. And some lost their lives. That's true. And I don't blame those people. What I blame is the people who didn't have to because it was in their interest. Like the people after the war who came out of hiding. Why did they kill those? They didn't do anything wrong to anybody. They managed to survive a war in terrible conditions. And yet the Pols thought it was the right thing to kill them because they were Jews. So, yes. There are two sides to the story.

>> Bill Benson: I think we're probably at a place where we will end our program. I'm going to turn it back to Halina for -- it's our tradition that our *First Person* gets the last word. So I'm going to give it back to Halina to do that.

Before Halina does that, a couple of reminders. We have *First Person* programs every Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. So we would love you to come back for that if you could possibly do that. And you can get information about the upcoming programs and ones that we've had in the past on the Museum's website. So please do that.

I'm also going to ask you, when Halina finishes, if you don't mind, you'll stand. The reason is our photographer, Joel, is going to get a great photograph of Halina with her back to you, with you in the background. And they actually turn out beautifully. So if you don't mind

doing that, we would love you to stand when Halina is finished.

So on that note, Halina?

>> Halina Peabody: Thank you. Well, I just wanted to say thank you for coming. I'm glad to be able to tell my story. Hopefully it will give you some idea what happened, at least to my family. I'm sorry that so few of us survived, but as I said, the ones that can impart the story in the hope that you can all remember what happened when things went into the wrong hands, when evil people were in charge. Hopefully this will be prevented for our children and grandchildren.

Thank you so much for listening.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: If any of you want to meet her, say hi or have a question, please don't be bashful.

[The presentation ended 12:00 p.m.]