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UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: ESTELLE LAUGHLIN

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>> Bill Benson: Good morning, 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 today. We are in our 15th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Estelle Laughlin, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2014 season of *First Person* is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. We are grateful for their generous support. I'd like to let you know Mr. Louis Smith is here with us today.

[Applause]

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 of our *First Person* guests serve as volunteers here at this museum. Our program will continue twice weekly through the middle of August. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the museum and its programs can complete the Stay Connected card that you will find in your program today or talk with a museum representative at the back of the theater when we finish today. In completing the form, you will receive an electronic copy of Estelle Laughlin's biography so that you can remember and share her testimony after you leave here today.

Estelle will share with us her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If we have time toward the end of our program, we may have an opportunity for you to ask Estelle a few questions.

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

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

Estelle Laughlin was born in Warsaw, Poland on July 9, 1929. Poland is highlighted on this map of Europe in 1933. Warsaw is highlighted on this map of Poland, also from 1933.

Estelle Laughlin was the younger of two sisters. In addition to her parents, her family included many aunts, uncles and cousins. 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 April 19, 1943 and continued until the final liquidation of the ghetto on May 16, 1943. Jewish fighters faced overwhelmingly superior forces of the Germans, but were able to hold them off for a month. Estelle and her family were hiding in the 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 May 1943.

After they were discovered, Estelle and her family were deported to the Majdanek death camp where Estelle's father was killed. The location of Majdanek 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 with Estelle's immigration certificate, which was issued in July 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 her first son, Estelle began attending college in Cleveland and finished after they moved to the Washington, DC area in 1961, when her husband joined the Kennedy Administration.

They have three sons. Estelle became a teacher in Montgomery County, Maryland, earned a master's degree and became a reading specialist. She retired in 1992. Estelle's three sons are very accomplished. One is a professor of geology, another is a psychologist, the third recently retired from a senior corporate position and now has his own consulting firm. Between them, they have given Estelle seven grandchildren, one for each day of the week as Estelle notes.

Estelle's husband died in 2008. She moved three years ago from the Washington, DC area to Chicago to be close to family.

Estelle volunteers with 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 a finalist for the 2012 ForeWord Reviews Book of the Year Awards. She is now writing a work of fiction for young children about the Warsaw Ghetto. Following our program today, Estelle will sign copies of her book.

With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Estelle Laughlin. [Applause]

Estelle, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person coming in from Chicago today. So thank you very much for that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: My pleasure to be here.

>> Bill Benson: You have so much to share with us, that we unfortunately can't do justice to everything you could share with us in our one hour, but we'll start and cover as much as we possibly can.

You were just 10 in Warsaw, Poland when World War II began with Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939. Before we turn to all that would happen to you during the war, the Holocaust and after, tell us first a little bit about you, your family, your community in those years before the war began.

>> Estelle Laughlin: I was born in Warsaw, Poland. All my memories from before the war, and Warsaw before the war, grows in my selective memory in golden radiance of lilac trees against open blue skies, rich sounds of good neighbors, happy holidays spent with family, kindness and faith and love, magic train rides through the countryside in the summer.

All these memories became shelters later in my life from a world crumbling around me. You see, when you lose everything, your memories become your possessions.

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, both from what you've shared with me and also what you've written in your book, you were just so extremely close to your father. Tell us a little bit about him.

>> Estelle Laughlin: My father was to me like a current of goodness. He was to me -- he was the line between the noblest of what human beings are capable of and the cruelness, and of course, he was my inspiration. He kept my soul alive.

There are so many examples, and they are all in my book, but one that comes quickly to my mind was that when I, and in the Warsaw Ghetto there was such poverty, and I shared a sandwich with a beggar. My mother said to me that she was so concerned that we stay strong and healthy, because you never knew there would be food the next day. She said, If you want to share food, that's kind. But ask me, and I'll give you more to share.

My father's response was, You were very hungry when you missed the lunch. Can you imagine how hungry the beggar was who missed so many lunches? And he said I did the right thing. To me it was a message that one has to hold onto one's soul in order to survive all that the soul needs to be nourished too. So while maybe I was hungry for a few minutes, it was a very fulfilling and soul-nurturing situation.

>> Bill Benson: Of course, you will tell us a little more about your father as we continue the discussion. Germany invaded Poland September 1, 1939, beginning World War II. Warsaw was attacked that very day by the Germans and they laid siege to the city. Tell us what you remember of that attack on Warsaw and the siege.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, of course, the siege came so suddenly, without declaring war. But there was a great deal of agitation before the outbreak of war. There was the build-up of concern with German forces building up on the Polish border, with the invasion of the land and with all of the news we heard about the tyranny in Germany.

On September 1 was a serene morning. War was just a concept, far from being a reality. My father kissed us in the morning and left to meet his business associates in the city. Then suddenly, there was a tremendous explosion that made the earth shake. All the air seemed to be sucked out of the air. Then there was this screeching of sirens, and then silence.

We turned on the radio, and we heard that a bomb was dropped on several buildings in Warsaw. Even at that moment, the reality of war seemed so distant, until that very night.

>> Bill Benson: In fact, you wrote, this is a quote from your book "In an instant I, at the age of 10, and Fredka, 11 1/2, stopped being care-free children. We began to carry the tragic burdens of life in an instant." Tell us about that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes, in an instant, our lives changed beyond recognition. The introduction was the bombardment, and the bombardment took place mostly at night. The messerschmitts and stuttgarts covered the sky, glares of light lit up the night sky, the buildings and bombs were showering on our heads.

Poland was invaded within one week. They were no match to the 20th century army that Germany had. So Poland was invaded in one week, but Warsaw resisted, was in siege for four weeks.

So after four weeks -- that night, the reality of war became so vivid. But the hardest part was the invasion, the marching in of the foreign troops. This is really when my life changed beyond recognition. Immediately, food was rationed. Foreign soldiers marched through our streets and snapped whips in our homes and streets. They isolated the Jewish people in a tiny fragment of the city. They rationed food. They turned off electricity. They turned off the telephones. Books were

forbidden. Schools were closed. We had no transportation. Newspapers were confiscated. Radios were stopped. We were virtually cut off from the world and everything that was taking place.

They isolated us in a tiny ghetto. They built a thick wall around us. They called the ghetto the death box. They filled the ghetto with Jewish people driven out from surrounding areas.

Most people came on foot. Most people came without a penny in their pockets. There was not enough shelter. There was not enough food. There was not enough medication. The streets were littered with dead bodies. Children, bodies of dead children on stoops were covered with posters saying "Children are the holiest thing. Our children must live."

Yet, in this inferno, people found incredibly heroic ways to fight back. We could not fight back with arms, because if we would as much as raise -- first of all, it was not accessible. We were so isolated. But if you would as much as utter a word of protest or complaint, you were shot. Your family was shot. And you see, Warsaw was an ancient city, and most people lived in apartment buildings. Then they would take people, the whole building, they could take all the people out and shoot them.

So the responsibility of not speaking up was tremendous. But how did we fight back? Immediately the Jewish community organized itself a self-aid organization, which was spread out through the city. The lowest rank of the organization were concentrated in each building. Each building had a kitchen, a soup kitchen to feed the hungry neighbors.

There was not a child over the age of 10 in our building who did not volunteer and do something, collect food we put on plates, and collected money. So everybody was doing something.

To own a book was an act of defiance, and many defied. There were libraries all over the ghetto. My father had his favorite stash of books by Yiddish writers, by Shalom Asch and Isaac, when those blinded with covers to keep our existence secret in a tiny room illuminated by a flickering carbide light. Our room was like a capsule of paradise. My father's voice would flow with swaddling care and comfort, bringing to us the remote world. We were separated from the curfew, deathly quiet outside our windows.

All over the ghetto brave teachers risked their lives in cold rooms to teach children to hold onto their inner selves and faith and love. There was one famous writer, a historian in the ghetto. His name was Chaim Kaplan. 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 it is true; the soul needs to be nourished too. That was our sustenance.

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, will you tell us, on that note, there you are with unbelievable restrictions on your movement and everything you can do, even only a book was punishable by death.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Yet, you've told us before that there was clandestine theater and dance and all done very, very secretly. Tell us a little bit about that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. Imagine, there was no bread, but we had theaters. We had lectures. We had concerts. And all of that was at the risk, it was capital punishment, such brutality.

Another interesting aspect that people often ask me, how did we survive, because food was rationed. The allowable ration amount of food was less than 10% of the daily requirements, caloric requirements. But there was a vigorous black market. Kids, boys no older than 6 or 8 years old, like

little mice, dug their way under the wall. If they were caught, they were shot on the spot. If they survived, their families ate, because there was such -- that sustained the people's life. You could not live on the rations.

There was also a vigorous market where, through the gates of the wall, and everybody was really part of it. The Nazis lined their pockets with bribes, and the guards lined their pockets too. Because, all the businesses were confiscated, and nobody could work.

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, as you told us, your father had his books, at risk of death he kept his books.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: He believed in that; participation in the arts was very important.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You also said your mother, on the other hand, focused mostly on practical ways to survive. Tell us about that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, my mother was very poetic too, and my mother felt very strongly that -- and she wasn't very romantic. My mother, you see, Jewish people were persecuted throughout the ages. We were persecuted -- we were blamed for the bubonic plague. We were persecuted and isolated in ghettos, and we created our own cultures wherever we were. So history was repeating itself.

My mother's one example of it. My mother was chased out of Russia by the wild Cossacks. So for her, it was the second time of persecution. So she was a little bit more practical. She was feistier than my father was. And I'm feisty.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: The Nazis began deporting large number of Jews to death and concentration camps in 1942. You and your family were able to avoid being deported. How did your family do that as the deportations increased in intensity and numbers during that time in the ghetto?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Of course, you will find all of the answers in my book, but I will try to summarize it. July, the deportations of the Warsaw ghetto uprising started, July 1942, the month of my 13th birthday. At first, we had no idea the deportations meant death. So some people, who were destitute, hungry, homeless, marched. Some people were forced to write letters to families in Warsaw asking them to join them in Bialystok and Minsk and other places where they were fed and clothed. You can imagine people who had no shelter marched without knowing that they were marching to death. But many, many people had.

Actually, where does one hide in an apartment building? Very much like the places that children play hide and go seek, and grandparents play with their children hide and go seek. We hid under beds. We hid in cupboards. We hid in drawers. We hid in between mattresses and box springs. And some of us, my family, hid in a room obscured by a closet. The door was obscured by a closet.

The deportations took place with 20th century know-how and stone-age values. It was just barbaric. Between July 1942 and September 1942, in a bare two months, 99% of the children in the Warsaw Ghetto 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 be deported.

I cringe when I talk about it. And I see children in the audience here, and it concerns me. I'm a grandmother and a retired teacher, so I want to tell you, I was 10 when these -- I was 13 during -- no, 12 during the deportations, so I want to tell the young people here that young people are very, very wise. They are very strong and very resilient. As long as you hold onto that which is best in you, to that which is good, no matter what is going to happen to you, you'll be OK.

Well, so the deportations, during the deportations people just disappeared from our lives. At first, we had no idea where the people were sent or what was really happening to them. But at some point, people came back, a few people, a handful of people managed to escape and hide under corpses, and then at night to come back to the ghetto. And they told us about these horrendous train rides to a place called Treblinka, where our people were gassed.

It is so impossible to believe that people who loved their mothers, who loved their fathers and their children, and their sisters and brothers, could do such horrendous things.

At that point, the war -- before the war, trains to me meant romance, meant promises of countries, of bucolic countrysides, of joy. At that point, the war train trembled on our lips. They reminded us of last hugs, of last heartbeats and fear.

At the point when it was known what was happening to the people who were deported, the people in the ghetto began to organize themselves into armed resistance, and my father was a member of the armed resistance too.

>> Bill Benson: Before we turn to the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, tell us just a little bit about how important getting a work permit was, and what your family did.

>> Estelle Laughlin: First of all, children under 14 were contraband. I was 13, so I was forbidden to live. My parents cut my hair. I had braids, and my mother cut my braids, and I dressed in adult clothes.

>> Bill Benson: To try to make you look older?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. So children were forbidden. Old people were forbidden. Only people who had -- at that point, most of the ghetto was empty. When I would walk down to the gate of our building, and I would stick my head out, hoping to hear a sign of life, the buildings were all vacant. In a big apartment building, we were the only family living. You could hear the silence. It was so palpable, you could feel it crawl through you. So there were very few people left.

So they concentrated, they closed the ghetto. The ghetto was called a wild area, and it was forbidden to enter. They created three sub-ghettos that had three factories. So only people who are useful, who had a license to work in these factories were permitted to live, and there were quite a few, a number of people who were the wild ones, they were called, who were hiding amongst us. My mother, sister and I, we were legal, and we were working in a shop. We were mending uniforms of German soldiers. My father was hiding.

>> Bill Benson: Because he did not have a work permit.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: He was completely one of the wild ones.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. Right. In my book, I describe how the people were hiding in the wild areas and how we dealt with it.

>> Bill Benson: So by early 1943, you were only -- you were one of less than 1% of the children that were left in the Warsaw Ghetto.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: There were some people who had work permits, like you, your mother and sisters, then there was those that were in hiding and the resistance, and thus began the Warsaw uprising. Tell us about that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, when the people began to arm themselves, the resistance began to build bunkers. The bunkers were in the basements. We moved from our second-story building to the ground floor, and we built a bunker too. The entrance to our bunker was lifting the powder room floor, commode and all. The resistance fighters also dug tunnels for navigation between the bunkers, and also dug tunnels underneath the wall to get to a Christian site to obtain arms from the Christian underground.

There were several skirmishes at the beginning of the year, in January, between the freedom fighters and the Nazi forces. As a punishment for these skirmishes, Himmler promised Hitler to cleanse the rest of the ghetto of Jews in three days, in time for Hitler's birthday.

So events erupted. I believe -- well, it was in April. I believe it was the first day of Passover, but I am not sure. It erupted with Nazi columns entering the ghetto with tanks and armored cars and flocks of bomber planes and humongous loudspeakers announcing that we better all report for resettlement., we knew what resettlement meant, or else they would cut us to pieces.

So we took a few bundles, lifted our trap door, stepped down the ladder, and stepped into the bunker, pulled the trap door down. The doors 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 gave us a sign when morning was rising and sun was setting.

How I craved for the open horizon, for the blue crispness of day. While we were in the bunkers, fighting erupted on the streets. Facing a 20th century army was a handful -- a band of poorly clad, poorly fed, poorly armed soldiers. They climbed up on rooftops. They stepped in front of open windows. They climbed up through the tunnels into street corners, and they lobbed Molotov cocktails and flamethrowers and whatever they had.

It's really remarkable that this handful, this band of freedom fighters fought longer than it took for friends of Poland to capitulate. At some point, a grenade was thrown onto our ceiling of our bunker, and we were dragged out. At this point, there was no place, no corner to hide anymore. They dragged us out into the street. Buildings were crumbling to our feet. Flames, enormous kinds of flames were licking the sky and painting it an other-worldly color of iridescent. Towers of smoke. People in congealed blood. And they marched us to Umschlagplatz.

I want you to know, people sometimes ask me, that we did not march like sheep. We marched like people with names, people with love in our hearts, children who wanted to feel the grass under our feet and catch a ball soaring through the air. This is how they marched us. The only difference, children sometimes ask me how did I feel as a child, inside I was no different from any child. The only difference was that I was literally tied, because I didn't have the freedom. And the difference between my grandchildren and children who are oppressed like that is that my grandchildren and children here are able to have these freedoms, and that's the way it's supposed to be.

They dragged us to Umschlagplatz, to the deportation station. They loaded us onto freight trains, and in the morning we were sent to an extermination camp.

>> Bill Benson: That's where you would lose your father.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about Majdanek and your arrival there and what then happened to you.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Majdanek was in Lublin. We were just like scattered on the ground. Children were isolated. There were very few children, but the few children still there were put in an enclosed place, and they were yammering "Mama, mama." It was terrible.

Women and men were separated. We were separated from my father. My father was sitting with a man on the ground, and my mother, sister and I were sitting with a group of women across from the men, from my father.

My father had a fever, and I was so used to looking into his eyes for kindness, for reassurance. He looked -- there was such grief in his eyes and he had such a high fever. I felt I wanted to run over to him.

I watched the guards when they were not looking, and I dashed across the divide, and I knelt in front of my father, and I said to him, "Daddy, don't worry. They won't get me." And I flipped the lapel of my coat, and I showed him. I said, "Daddy, remember, they won't get me. I have cyanide." We had cyanide sewn into the lapels of our coats. And my father turned to me, and he said, "No. You must live. Don't do that." So I lived.

The camp was enclosed by barbed -- electrified barbed wire fence. Every few feet there was a -- there were towers with guards watching us, and dogs and lights, beams of light following every step we took.

You know what -- even in this hard place, in Majdanek, the women on the bunk beds composed poetry and songs. And it was not to say we didn't have a pencil or paper to write it down on, so it was not like to save it for history. It was cathartic. The only thing we had left was words. So we used the words to express our indignation, our longings, our pain.

Time does not allow to describe what life was like in Majdanek, and in my book I describe how my mother, sister and I survived Majdanek and eventually were sent to -- Majdanek was an extermination camp, and there were distinctions between the different concentration camps. Majdanek was an extermination camp with a crematorium and the chimneys. We were sent to Skarzysko, then later to Czestochowa, which were slave labor camps. The slave labor camps we were in, we work in ammunition factories, were also enclosed by electrified barbed wire fences and guards, and people died of hunger and starvation and typhus.

Eventually, a miracle happened. We heard --

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, may I stop you for a moment?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Sure.

>> Bill Benson: Before you get to that, will you tell us, when you left Majdanek and were sent to the next camp, Skarzysko, before, you're on the train, and before you got there the train stopped, and you credit that with saving your lives. Can you tell us about that?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yeah. You know, 99%, or maybe more, reason for survival was random luck. Half a percent was feistiness. Without that half a percent of feistiness, you were 100% dead.

On the train, when we were transported from Majdanek to Skarzysko, we had to stop for a pit stop, and we were afraid to leave our train. Because the Nazis were the soldiers shooting just for the sport. They pelted our trains with bullets the entire time. So there was death all around us. But my sister absolutely had to go, and she said, "I just have to go." We had the pact, the three of us, that if one of us died, all three of us would die. When she left the train, all three of us did. When we had to board the train again, we boarded a different car.

Now, when the train arrived in Skarzysko, there were three separate camps, and one camp was where people were working on gunpowder, and in that camp most people died after four weeks or so, because they were working with gunpowder, which the powder ruined their lungs. They looked yellow. They were just -- the skin absorbed, and the lungs. So the fact that we changed the cars, we stayed in a car that did not go to that branch where they worked on the gunpowder.

>> Bill Benson: That was by accident.

>> Estelle Laughlin: That was random luck. 99%. You know, they go in, you scoop up people by the thousands. It's like when you sweep the floor, a few pieces, lucky pieces of dust will remain.

>> Bill Benson: When you were in Skarzysko, I believe, you, your mother and your sister were well regarded by the others around you, and at one point I think they referred to you as "the three monkeys." You actually thought about making that the title of your book. Tell us why that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: My mother was the only mother in the entire camp, and as far as I know in Majdanek we were the only family of three, so we were very fortunate. So we clung together.

In my book I also describe the fact that we had the pact that we would die together, and that in a way saved us, because we were ready to really go to the gas chamber with my sister. It's a lengthy story, so I will skip it.

>> Bill Benson: They referred to you as the three monkeys.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. We were covered with lice and mange. Lice itch. We scratched and were covered with scabs. So we would pick lice off each other for relief. We clung to one another. We were like one organism. So the people referred affectionately to us as the three monkeys.

>> Bill Benson: In the summer of 1944, you would then be moved again to Czestochowa, and from there liberated --

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. Now I'm going to describe the miracle of liberation.

>> Bill Benson: OK. Please, yes.

[Laughter]

>> Estelle Laughlin: One night we hear this rumble of planes, and the rumble comes closer and closer, and louder and louder. And we say, Could it be, after all these years?

Now, this was from September 1939 till January 1945. And we had no idea if the Allies were winning or losing. We were so completely isolated. We might as well have been on a different planet. It was impossible to believe that only a few rabbit hops away from us people were sailing on silver lakes, and children were sitting with families around tables, as children should. And here we hear the planes and bombs are dropping. That was like a symphony.

We kept on praying, Please, drop the bombs on -- you see, we were on death row; dying by an Allied bomb would be such a dignified death. So we prayed for the bombs to rain.

Well, we were liberated that night. I assure you that liberation was very unlikely to be like anything that you are likely to imagine. It was January. All we wore was a cap, no underwear, no socks, no stockings, wooden clogs, ground covered with ice and snow, and not a penny in our pockets, hungry, no family, no home to go back to. So we wondered for a very, very long time. By the way, in my book, I spent a lot of writing about liberation, because very little has really been written about it. So we wandered through Poland, and we wandered through the Czech Republic, at that time it was Czechoslovakia, and we wandered through Germany, and we eventually came to this placid land, to the United States.

We came with $30 in our pockets. My sister and I were still young. We started -- for us, life still held a lot of promise. We're still an unopened package. My sister and I started out by working in a garment factory. I was a button sewer; my sister was a finisher.

Eventually, my sister and I, I had only three years of public school, formal education, and some tutoring in the ghetto, which was very spotty. My sister, who was a year and a half older, maybe had 4 1/2, five years of education. She became a professor of comparative literature and wrote a very important book. She collected poetry written in Yiddish and Polish in the ghettos and concentration camps, and translated them. I became a teacher and a reading specialist.

The reason why I mention it are twofold. One is that average people are capable of a great deal. The other one, more important, is that the inspiration for my sister and me to go back and enter college with a limited education, our inspiration to be the most we could be, to be the best that we could be, to fulfill ourselves as human beings and individuals, came from the darkest spot. In the

bunker, when our world was crumbling around us, my father had a tutor for us. So for him, that was his way of denying that his children had no future.

So my sister and I started life again. For my mother it was much harder. Not every survivor was able to start over again. My poetic mother, who in front of the crematoria murmured in our ears "Life is sacred. It's noble to fight to stay alive," and who prophesized, she said "You'll see. If we survive, if a miracle will happen and we'll survive, you will see that the Nazis' children and their children's children will be asking them, 'Where was your conscience?'"

She's right. She was right. The German people are now asking, and I feel profoundly grateful for it. Because I feel that revenge is not an issue, and forgiveness is not an issue. But I feel deeply that understanding is a responsibility. And I feel that we are all left with the legacy to understand how people can do such, the ability of human beings to be that cruel.

So I feel that we are all left with a legacy to understand it, and I feel so grateful for the audience for being here and for the museum.

You know, as long as Darfur has happened, and as long as there are people saying that the Holocaust never occurred, in some ways Majdanek and Auschwitz are still with us, and we have to be reminded from time to time what can happen to the conscience of a nation, what can happen to love, and what can happen to trust.

I think that this museum is proof that history always remembers, and we always must listen. And I hope there's time for questions.

>> Bill Benson: We have time for a couple of questions, I think. We have mics coming down the aisle. What we'd like to do is wait till you get the mic. If you have a question, please make it -- one

right here, Sonia. Please make the question as brief as you can, and if need be I will repeat it just to make sure that everybody in the room, including Estelle, hear the question. Go ahead.

>> Hi. Were your -- was your family very religious? If so, what role did that play in your survival?

>> Estelle Laughlin: My family, I don't come from a religious family. I am not a religious person. But I consider myself very spiritual. I feel very connected with every living thing. And my family was that way too.

What role did it play? I think it varied. I think that some people clung to their religion, and to them I think it was the higher good. For other people, it was a question where was God when the most innocent children were shoved into ovens. So I think it was very individual as we deal with the meaning of life.

>> Bill Benson: OK. Do we have another one? A gentleman right here.

>> At what point, and what were your thoughts, when you realized people were actually being taken for extermination?

>> Bill Benson: What were your thoughts when you realized that people, when they were deported, were going to go to their death?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. I want to say hope, but hope to me is fiction, is a story. How can you have hope when you know that you are in line, and the only reason why you are not in the gas chamber is simply that there was just no room, so you wait your turn?

But I think that there is a very basal current in all of us, a current of life, and I think that this is beautiful. And I know I wanted to live, I know I had the right to live. I know that I felt it in me. The

pulse was very, very pronounced and very alive, and I feel that this is very important current in all of us.

I also think that one other part of the current that was still alive in me, just as strong, was that there was a difference between right and wrong, and that neither one purged the other.

>> Bill Benson: OK. I'm going to -- is there another one? There is. We have one more question, I think in the very back row. Yep.

>> I want to know about the current situation with the wars going on around the world, and about the Democrats and the Republicans and the Tea Party, what can you tell us, and how can we help each other quit fearing?

>> Bill Benson: If I could jump in for a minute. Certainly we want to stay focused solely on Estelle's story, what she went through, and definitely not get into a political discussion. But I think I'm going to turn to Estelle in a moment for her last word to us, in just a moment. But thank you anyway.

>> Estelle Laughlin: I think that the beauty of the United States is that there are so many voices, and I have to believe that all these voices will be united in that which is in the best interest for our country and for humanity, that we will put always the welfare of people above. To me, idealism is to serve the people and not people to serve an idea. So I hope that all the ideas will serve the people.

>> Bill Benson: I want to thank --

>> Estelle Laughlin: Maybe if you have a few more.

>> Bill Benson: I think we're going to close up.

[Laughter]

We got to get you to sign some books.

[Laughter]

I want to thank all of you for being here with us. We have three more weeks of our program this year. We hope that you might be able to return. Look to the museum's website for information about the *First Person* program in 2015.

We're going to close in just a moment. I'm going to turn back to Estelle to close our program. But before I do that, I want to mention two things. One, when Estelle is done, she will step off the stage, and we need to get her up the aisle as quickly as possible, because she's going to be available to sign copies of her book. And certainly, if you're there in line, you will have a chance to say hi to Estelle as well. I know some of you had questions you didn't get to ask.

The other thing I want to mention is that when we're done, I'm going to ask you all to stand. Our photographer Joel is going to come up on stage and take a photograph of Estelle with you as the backdrop. It really is just a very nice portrait of Estelle's *First Person* program.

So it's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person has the last word, and so on that note, Estelle.

>> Estelle Laughlin: I want to thank everyone for being here, for your interest, for your support of the museum. The fact that there is such interest and there's such wonderful attendance gives me -- reinforces my hope for humanity. I'll be happy to sign books. While my book is a story of destruction, it's also a story of survival and renewal.
Thank you all very much for being here.
[Applause]
>> Bill Benson: If I can get you all to stand, if you don't mind.
[Applause]
[Ended at 12:00 p.m.]