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

REMOTE CART

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CART Services Provided by:
Christine Slezosky, CBC, CCP, RPR
Home Team Captions
1001 L Street NW, Suite 105
Washington, DC 20001
202-669-4214
855-669-4214 (toll-free)
info@hometeamcaptions.com

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>> Susan Snyder: Good morning and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Susan Snyder and I am host of today's program *First Person*. Thank you for joining us. We're in our 16th year of the *First Person* program. Our *First Person* today is Halina Peabody.

This 2015 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 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 mid- August. The Museum's website, 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 in the program or speak with a museum representative at the back of the theater when we finish our program. In doing so you will also receive an electronic copy of Halina's biography so you can remember and share her testimony after you leave here today.

Halina will share with us her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows at the end of our program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask a few questions. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Why don't you have a seat.

This is a map of Europe with the detail of Poland. Halina was born in Krakow on December 12, 1932. She was the daughter of Ignacy and Olga Litman.

This photograph features 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, 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 the luggage, all the money she had and the coats you see them wearing in this picture.

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

Halina's mother decided that the safest place for the family to hide was in plain sight. She found a job at a German headquarters peeling potatoes for the German troops.

After the war, Halina and her family emigrated to England.

Please welcome Halina.

[Applause]

Thank you so much, Halina, for doing *First Person* today. It's always so nice to talk to you. I learn something new every time we sit down.

You had mentioned that -- first of all, let me just say that you were born in Krakow but you lived in the town of Zaleszczyki.

>> Halina Peabody: Zaleszczyki.

>> Susan Snyder: Zaleszczyki. Maybe by the time we're done I'll have it down. Can you tell us, first of all, where was the town? What kind of a town was it?

>> Halina Peabody: The town was the easternmost little town on the front of Romania. It was a beautiful little town where my parents moved when they got married because my father was a beginning dentist and wanted to go in a small town to start a new surgery. Krakow was obviously full of dentists.

My mother was very happy to come to Zaleszczyki because it was full of water. It was almost completely surrounded by the river. And my mother had been a champion swimmer. So she had the opportunity to do water-skiing, swimming, of course. She just loved being on the water. So she was very happy about it.

My father, as I said, started the surgery. So we lived in Zaleszczyki with a house, half for the surgery and half where we lived. Two months before the war my sister was born.

>> Susan Snyder: How did your parents meet? Do you know?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, my father was very interested in my mother because she had won championship of Poland in swimming and she was very famous. That's what she told me.

>> [Laughter]

>> Halina Peabody: People were pointing at her in the streets. She was very young, maybe 18. So he courted her and caught her. He knew a good thing when he saw it.

>> [Laughter]

>> Susan Snyder: The town that you lived in, who were the people that were your friends and neighbors? Was it a predominantly Jewish town, mainly non-Jewish?

>> Halina Peabody: Zaleszczyki was a small town. It was a border town. They had the religious Jewish people living in one part of the town but my father belonged to the non-observant ones. The professionals were not very observant in Krakow as well. So we didn't speak Yiddish at home. My father was kind of friends with the doctors and other professionals in the town.

As far as I remember, we had lots of friends; very nice people. But I was not quite 7 years old so my memories are very scant. You know, child's memories of those years.

>> Susan Snyder: In 1939, September of 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Your town -- do you remember this?

>> Halina Peabody: What happened in September 1939, Poland was split into two. Our part of Poland --

>> Susan Snyder: Right. I'm sorry.

>> Halina Peabody: That's all right. It was invaded by the Russians. They split Poland. Germans took the upper part. The Russians came to our part. The main thing that they worried about was the men because the men were afraid of being conscripted into the Russian Army, which was the usual procedure what they did and they were basing themselves on the First World War. So the men were mostly the ones in danger, they thought. They never thought that women and children were. So therefore a lot of men got together and just crossed the river. There was a nice little bridge going to Romania. And they just crossed over.

My father was afraid to take us because I had a baby sister. So he was worried about not having milk for her and conditions would be hard. So they didn't think women and children were in danger. So we were left alone.

>> Susan Snyder: Do you remember that time period? The Russians had taken over this part of Poland. Do you remember?

>> Halina Peabody: I remember that the people were very scared but we were mostly in the house trying to look after the baby. That was my memory. And I know everybody was whispering and being quiet and scared. But those are my memories.

>> Susan Snyder: So your father did go to Romania. He returned?

>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. What happened was after a few weeks, things kind of settled down. The Russians took everything they could find. They pilfered. And people started thinking, you know, the ones that crossed decided that maybe they left the families and maybe

things are now quiet enough, maybe they could cross back again. So a few of them got together and everything was frozen solid by then and they tried to cross over on the river back to Poland. And by then apparently the Russians sealed the border. They caught them all. And when they caught them, they arrested them. They said they were spies because they were going back and forth. They put them in prison. In my father's case, being a dentist, said he was a spy, put him on trial and gave him 20 years hard labor. They transported him to Russia. We lost him completely by then.

We had also had to be ready to be taken to Russia because as family of a spy, a criminal, we had no right to be in the house. Therefore, we were ready to go, packed, they were going to take us to Russia.

Fortunately they did not take us but they threw us out of our house. And we went up the road to a little town called Tluste. That was a little town that we spent the rest of the Russian occupation.

>> Susan Snyder: Until 1941?

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. Until the Germans. And then very quickly the Germans decided they would take the rest of Poland and the Russians just disappeared. So we came back to our house and settled back into our house, awaiting the German occupiers.

>> Susan Snyder: When you say your family, you, your sister, your mother returned back to your town, returned back to your house waiting for the Nazi occupation, essentially. What did you anticipate -- what did your mother anticipate? Do you know?

>> Halina Peabody: We were just worried because we didn't know what to expect. Nobody knew. We all wanted to cooperate.

>> Susan Snyder: Did you weigh which was better, Russian versus your --

>> Halina Peabody: We had no choice.

>> Susan Snyder: Right. You said earlier there was a chance you might be deported also to Russia.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes.

>> Susan Snyder: You said fortunately or unfortunately you didn't get deported. Knowing the historical background of what happened to those Jews, do you think the choice would have been better to be deported?

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. They did survive. Everybody did survive, yes. My aunt was taken, my uncle, my cousin and they did survive. It was very hard. Some of them were very hard conditions. My father was in the -- he apparently had a little bit of conditions because he was the only medical person there so he was made a medical officer of the camp. He had apparently not as bad a situation after the first year. First year he never talked about. Apparently it was terrible. I don't know what they did to him, he never talked about it. But afterwards it was not so terrible. And just before the Germans came we managed to have a few letters back and forth. So we knew --

>> Susan Snyder: You had some sign --

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. He was there for 20 years. That's all we knew. And then, of course, when the Germans came, we lost complete contact with him.

>> Susan Snyder: You knew he was sentenced to 20 years. You had a couple of letters. I'm sure the letters were censored, right?

>> Halina Peabody: Of course.

>> Susan Snyder: So the information was very vague.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. It was vague.

>> Susan Snyder: What about other family in the area? Did you have family that came to where you were?
>> Halina Peabody: No. We had no family. My two aunts that came when the Russians were coming in 1939, one aunt was taken to Russia and the other aunt stayed because she was sick and they left her. She then perished afterwards in a camp. But we never saw her again. That was the aunt actually that was in the picture, Aunt Irka. So we lost touch. But we had good friends. There was a very nice little community. And they took care of us. They really helped us. Because my mother was with the two of us. We had no visible means of support either. So they were very, very good to us, our friends.
>> Susan Snyder: What was Nazi occupation like?
>> Halina Peabody: Well, first of all, there was various commands.
>> Susan Snyder: Things changed immediately with laws against the Jews.
>> Halina Peabody: Exactly. First of all, there was no school for Jewish children. You couldn't -- they couldn't come out at night.
>> Susan Snyder: A curfew?
>> Halina Peabody: A curfew. And every Jewish person had to be working for the Germans. In the case of my mother -- they knew everything about everybody. They had lists. So they knew my mother was a wonderful knitter and also did wonderful embroidery. So she was made the chief knitter for the mayor of the town, the German mayor of the town, who had lots of children. My mother was knitting for his children and looking after us.

Everybody was very cooperative. They tried to be as good -- we didn't know what to expect, obviously. If there were no particular jobs for Jewish people, then they had them cleaning the sidewalks. It was that strict. And they would take groups of people to various jobs. They had lots of fields there. There were various jobs to do. So they would take a group of young people in the morning and they would come back at night. They said everybody was very cooperative. We just did not know what to expect but we felt if we cooperated that things would be, you know, ok.
>> Susan Snyder: And what about you? It's hard to go back and remember obviously 70 years ago but did you feel overwhelmingly that the best thing to do was to help your mother, to not create waves, to be sort of robbed of your childhood essentially?
>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. My mother was very good at keeping up my skills because my father had taught me to read before the war. My mother kept up my reading skills. My mother was a wonderful person, as all mothers are. But my mother was very strict but very good, you know. So whatever she told me I would do with no problems. I don't think I gave her any problems. We looked after the baby. The baby was not healthy. We had lots of problems there. She had problems with feeding her. So it was hard. But as I said, our friends helped us. And everybody was, as I said, hoping for the best.

In the meantime, we had to, of course, give up everything. I didn't mention we had -- confiscated anything. They also put the Jewish star on the homes. And we had the Jewish arm guards to wear. Being so young, stayed home with her. She would go out and knit and bring the stuff back and forth. Things were more or less calm.
>> Susan Snyder: More or less calm under Nazi occupation.
>> Halina Peabody: Yes.
>> Susan Snyder: What was the first indication that really something was wrong, that you were in trouble?
>> Halina Peabody: Well, what happened --

>> Susan Snyder: In the Jewish community, I should say.
>> Halina Peabody: What happened was they also created a Jewish committee of the Jewish leaders in the town.
>> Susan Snyder: The Nazis appointed people to do the work.
>> Halina Peabody: Whatever they needed they would demand through the committee.
>> Susan Snyder: Jewish community.
>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. And after they were taking the groups in and out and everybody was working and, as I said, quietly, trying to be compliant, they asked for a larger group; they said to congregate in the main square and that they would go out -- a little bit out of town there was a old Polish Army camp.

The weather in Zaleszczyki, we had four different separate seasons. The winter was very, very harsh. Everything was frozen solid. Just like in the summer you could grow apricots, cherries in the garden. So there were really two different distinct seasons, yes. Because it was wintertime and so harsh, we used to put double windows, something in between. It was really, really cold weather there.

So this big group was requested to come into the square and they would be taken out into this camp because there were lots of young trees and they wanted to bind the trunks of the trees for the winter. You know, you put burlap around the trunks so that the trees don't die. And that was the reason that a lot of people came and even some volunteered. And they were marched up the road. And we waited for them to come back, as usual. The whole day went by. We waited, waited; evening came and nobody came back. People got very anxious and nervous and didn't know what to think. They just weren't coming back.

Finally, towards the evening one man came back. He had been wounded. He was shot in the arm. And he told the story what happened. When they came up to the camp, they found an open grave with planks over it. They were told to undress and lay on the planks and they were shot one by one. And as they were shot, they dropped in. And this man who survived was one of the last ones to be shot. They missed his heart. He was able to dig himself out. Because when they left, they didn't even cover them very much. He managed to come back and he told us the story.

So then the whole community understood that things were very, very bad. Everybody started looking for hiding places because we gathered that we were going to have to be on the run. 600 people were killed. So you can imagine the situation in the town.
>> Susan Snyder: And people you knew because the town was small?
>> Halina Peabody: Oh, yes, of course. I was very young but I still know a lot of people that lost their lives there.

So we just -- then, you know, we waited to see what the next step is going to be knowing that things are not going to be great. The next thing that came was a demand for people to go to work in Germany. That was a very common thing because they needed people to work in Germany. A lot of people did go. The non-Jews went willingly because they needed the work and they were not being killed. But the Jewish people never offered to go to Germany for work. This was a demand. And they were not going to be paid or anything like that.
>> Susan Snyder: Slave labor, forced labor.
>> Halina Peabody: That's right. They demanded a set number of people to be in the square. They were going to go to Germany for work. People obviously went. They managed to get the right number of people. Then they put them all on the train. And, again, you know -- we hid

with the cook. We used to have a cook. The whole day we spent with the cook in Zaleszczyki.
>> Susan Snyder: So temporarily until you could --
>> Halina Peabody: Until they would start looking.
>> Susan Snyder: But your mother knew she needed to do something. Right?
>> Halina Peabody: Well, yes. But there was not much to do. We had nowhere to go. There was nowhere to go. This was a hiding place for one day.
>> Susan Snyder: Right.
>> Halina Peabody: Also, the Germans didn't want the trouble. It wasn't such a big Jewish community so they didn't want to have the trouble to try and find us, you know, next time. So what they did is they threw all of us, whatever remained, into the town, the next town, called Tluste. And what they did, which we realized when we got there, was that they had people -- they did the same thing in all the communities around there. With the remains of the people they didn't manage to kill they put into Tluste. So it became a ghetto later.
>> Susan Snyder: A larger town?
>> Halina Peabody: A little larger.
>> Susan Snyder: They gathered the smaller towns and moved them.
>> Halina Peabody: Whatever remained of the Jewish communities around that area they put there. We couldn't know what was happening. There were no radios, no newspapers. So we didn't know.
>> Susan Snyder: And you weren't allowed to have them anyway.
>> Halina Peabody: No, we were not. But we didn't know. So we realized we were now in the same town as we were during the Russian occupation. That was the only thing. We had some contacts there. So we were put into a common kind of housing. And, again, the first thing they started doing was looking for hiding places because we knew what was awaiting us more or less. My mother said to me: This is not going to help because you know what they're going to do, they're going to move us again.
>> Susan Snyder: Thinking one step ahead.
>> Halina Peabody: Right. But, again, there was nothing to be done. She would very much have liked to have the children, my sister and me, to take to Romania, but -- there were some ships going apparently but nothing ever came of it.

So again, we were waiting for the next whatever shoe to fall. And it came down. They demanded a set number of people again. They said would work in Germany. So everybody had their own hiding places. My mother did not want to hide in the same house. She had these contacts. So she decided to split us up. We had two farmers which she knew from the previous trip. She put me up in the loft in one of the farmers and she, herself, went to another farmer -- excuse me.
>> Susan Snyder: She separated you.
>> Halina Peabody: She separated us. She went with the other farmer with my baby sister.
>> Susan Snyder: With Eva.
>> Halina Peabody: Yeah.
>> Susan Snyder: Were you afraid to be separated? What happened when she said that she was going do this?
>> Halina Peabody: I don't know. I knew the lady. Whatever my mother, you know --
>> Susan Snyder: What she said, you did.
>> Halina Peabody: I trusted her. But all day I was worried very much because I thought that she was caught.

>> Susan Snyder: You had no idea.
>> Halina Peabody: I had no idea. They were collecting people and dragging them out. I was thinking my mother was caught because the lady who had me kept telling me, you know, she saw this one there and these people I knew from our house. So I knew. So I was petrified that she was caught. I waited all day. Towards the evening she did come and get me. When she saw me, she told me what happened to her. She said that the woman who kept her got scared in the middle of the day and threw her out into an empty field. And the field was apparently completely flat. It had one little bush. She crouched by that bush with my sister for the rest of the day. She said that there were airplanes flying around looking for stragglers. They were looking for stragglers. It was some miracle that she did not get caught.

Then she told me how she thought I was caught. So she thought I was caught. So we both had this feeling that the other one was caught. And she said, “Look, the way things are, we're not going to split up again. Whatever happens to us we will go and do together.” Yeah. So she's not going to do this again.

And she, again, as I said, there was not much we could do because there were no doors open to us, nowhere to run. But in the end, the bottom line was that they came up with this idea that because we were three females that perhaps we didn't look very Jewish, we didn't speak Jewish -- my mother's Polish was very good. She went to a Polish school.
>> Susan Snyder: You said “they” came up with this idea.
>> Halina Peabody: A friend. Friends. My mother's friends. So they went to a priest and purchased papers in different names.
>> Susan Snyder: With what?
>> Halina Peabody: I don't know.
>> Susan Snyder: Did you assume your mother --
>> Halina Peabody: I know they paid. I don't know.
>> Susan Snyder: So she bought false IDs.
>> Halina Peabody: That's correct.
>> Susan Snyder: Tell us about going to Jaroslaw.
>> Halina Peabody: Yes. Well, when we got the papers, we managed to get out of this area. I don't know if it was closed there or not yet but we managed to get out. They put us on the train.

Now, my mother decided to go to a place, sort of on the way to Krakow. Whether they had any significance or not I don't know. Obviously by then I was her partner because we were the only two. She sat me down. She gave me all the details, a new name, a new birth date, new grandparents, new birthplace, everything. So I had to learn that.
>> Susan Snyder: You say this -- whenever I read your oral history or anything, you describe it as a partnership. You feel like at this point your mother needed you as an equal as opposed to being her child because you were old enough.
>> Halina Peabody: That's right. That's right. I was old enough. Yes. And, you know, fear of death will make you grow up very fast. So, yeah, from then on we were partners.

Of course, the baby, my sister was too young, too, so we didn't tell her anything. I did not know much about the Catholic religion. I didn't really have any idea except that I think I was told that I have to cross myself with my right hand going in and out of the church. That's about the amount of information I had.
>> Susan Snyder: But you had a close call on the way. Right?
>> Halina Peabody: Oh, yes. Well, I'm not there yet.

>> [Laughter]
>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. The train journey was going to take four days and four nights. You can imagine how that was with the three of us. We had to change trains in between. It was not today's trains. It was the old-fashioned.

As we started our trip, a young man attached himself to us and started chatting my mother up and asking about the children. Slowly, slowly. In the end he started pushing us, asking if there was some Jewish person in our family. Because as far as Hitler was concerned, it was enough to have great, great, great ancestry that were Jewish. It was enough. And my mother finally said to me: You know, I couldn't withstand the pressure; I told him, yes, that, in fact, we are Jewish. Which at this point he said: Well in that case, you know, I have to take you to the Gestapo but I'm going to Jaroslaw as well so I'm going to accompany you and when we get to Jaroslaw, I'll take you over to the Gestapo.

So that's how we traveled for the four days and four nights. He made sure that one of the kids was in his sight. He looked after us. And my mother, as usual, was thinking what could she do.

There was nowhere to run. I certainly wouldn't have gone without her. So she finally started talking to him and asking him for what he thought would be the only kind of way out for us. She said she was going to give him the ticket for what we had left, two suitcases was all we had left of our belongings and a little money she had and the coats we had on our back but he had to promise her one thing: when we get to the Gestapo that they was going to have us shot, all three of us at one time. Quickly. Because she did not -- she realized what terrible things awaited us if we got split up. They didn't keep children. She might have survived as a slave laborer but she did not want to survive. She just wanted to save the children. And there was no way that she could do it so she felt it was better to shoot us quickly so we would not suffer whatever tortures were awaiting us. So he promised. He said he would. And that's how we traveled.

We were exhausted. Can you imagine four days and four nights on the train, two kids.
>> Susan Snyder: Knowing that you were going to be handed over to the Gestapo.
>> Halina Peabody: Well, that thought, you know, that's what I was just coming to. We were so tired. We were not thinking. We were just traveling. Going. Going. And then after four days we arrived in Jaroslaw. As we were getting off the train, suddenly I woke up and I said, oh my God, you know, we're now going to get shot. So I started pulling at my mother and saying, “Mom, mom, I don't want to die.” My poor mom, you know, she looked at him and she said, look, maybe you can let her go; she's blond and green-eyed, maybe she can survive. And I said, “No, no, I don't want to go by myself.”

So as we were walking towards the Gestapo, my mother still thinking. Finally she said, look, I have given you everything I have; just keep it. Why don't you just let us go and try our luck? You know, you said you had children of your own. Why do you want to have this on your conscience? Just let us go and we'll try our luck. And something touched him. He let us go. His parting words were "You don't have a chance," but he left us. And that was one of the other miracles that happened.

So there we were in this strange town, in the main road, and we were walking. Where were we going? My mother saw a little cafe. So we walked in. Asked for a little milk for my sister. Started looking around. First of all, we didn't know if the papers were real or not. Could have given us anything. I gave them to the Museum, as you know. I don't know if it was

good or not. And those days there were no computers. We couldn't really check. So we just worried that we wouldn't want to be caught and ask for papers which we had but we didn't want that.

So my mother realized that we needed to find a place to stay. So she started asking if there was anybody who takes lodgers in. A young man got up and said, yes, you know, there's a washer lady, very nice, she takes in lodgers. He said, “I'll take you over there.” So he walked us over to this nice lady. She was a tiny little lady. She saw the mother and two children completely bedraggled, four days and four nights, full of life. God, I don't know. Anyway so she said she would take us. Her son, absolutely not, "don't take her." But, you know, she was a very good Christian. She said: Look, this is a mother and two children; I have to take her. So another one of those miracles. So she gave us a bed. That's all we needed. It was wartime. It was a small town.

>> Susan Snyder: Everybody was suffering.

>> Halina Peabody: Exactly. So we got this one bed. We didn't need anymore. It was warmer that way anyway. Poland is very cold in the winter. So my mother told her, “Look, I had no money” -- because she gave him everything – “but the next day, tomorrow, I'll go and get a job and whatever I earn, I'll bring to you for having us.”

And she did that. She got a few jobs. She was very worried about my sister who was very sickly. We never knew exactly what was wrong with her. I think she was very weak. She had full of boils on her body. That, as I said, was really hard on my mother because she used to tell me that she used to come at night and wouldn't be sure if she would find her alive. It was that bad. I didn't realize how bad it was.

But I was strong. I was the one that was out. And she always sends me out because she felt that -- my hair with the braids. My sister's hair was very curly. And that was a bad thing. Because Polish girls have straight, blond hair. And Jewish girls have got curly hair. And this was always a sign. So the thing is, she was always afraid that somebody would point. And it was enough.

>> Susan Snyder: So she would go out doing odd jobs during the day.

>> Halina Peabody: She worked as sort of a housekeeper wherever she could find.

>> Susan Snyder: She managed to make it work.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes, she did. They looked after my sister. As a Polish child, I was allowed to go to school for two hours a day. That was very good because one was for general studies but one was for religion. And that was a very nice priest. I was able to catch a little bit of information about how to behave in church.

>> Susan Snyder: You were Catholic.

>> Halina Peabody: Absolutely.

>> Susan Snyder: Aged 10 or 11?

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. I knew I was Jewish.

>> Susan Snyder: Did you end up observing Holy Communion?

>> Halina Peabody: Absolutely. Absolutely. I did whatever was requested.

>> Susan Snyder: How did you feel about that?

>> Halina Peabody: Well, my mother said that we all pray to the same God but through different religions and that we happen to be Jewish. That's all. And it never bothered me. I never had any conflict about it.

>> Susan Snyder: I think online we have some pictures of you in our photo archives of wearing your --

>> Halina Peabody: Communion. Yes. That's right. I did go. Yes, I did go.
>> Susan Snyder: You should check it out.
>> Halina Peabody: It's a very beautiful religion. It's very easy to become. But if you're already something else, you know, you can't. Plus the fact is that I realize that they wanted to kill me because I'm Jewish. And I felt that was very unjust. I felt that it was just not right. So I was very angry about that. So I did what I had to do. I had some friends. We did the best we could.

Actually, the church was wonderful to come in on Sunday. I remember the incense. The priest was lovely. The Germans did not come to church. On Sundays when we went to church, it was really a very relaxing time. We didn't have enough clothes. We had the clogs. We had to wear newspapers around our feet. It wasn't an easy life but the church, Sunday church, was very nice.
>> Susan Snyder: What was the woman who you were hiding with like? What was she like? And do you think she suspected that you were Jews?
>> Halina Peabody: Well, I have been thinking about it. I didn't think so at the time but I do know that she figured that my mother was too old to deal with, my sister was too young. I was the one she was working on. She wanted to save my soul. And I gave her credit. She was a lovely lady. She was a real person. She was a washerwoman. She had a big accident. Her left hand, she had no fingers. She had some accident. And I always felt there was some connection between us on that score as I'll tell you later. But her sons, strapping four boys, men. We were always afraid of them because we didn't know. They weren't too happy having us.
>> Susan Snyder: They weren't happy not necessarily because they knew you were Jews but because it was additional people to take care of?
>> Halina Peabody: No, I don't -- I'm not sure. I'm not sure. But they ended up accepting us. It was a full house. It was a little house, as you saw that. It was a little house. Everybody got a bed. There was quite a few people. It was a little house divided into three parts. We were in the middle part.

My mother, as usual, was trying to find a safer way. First of all, she took all the hair off my sister. She shaved her head completely. Because she said it was to make it thicker. That was her excuse. She was always looking for a safer job, for a little better condition. So she was always thinking forward.

During that time we were there we had one letter from the people we left behind who did not survive but somehow managed to write us this letter. And that letter really gave us the possibility of a future because what it said was that my father had sent a letter through the Red Cross to say that he was safe with his sister in Palestine. Now, that's a bit of history that is different because Palestine was, at that time, under the British mandate as was the whole Middle East. We knew that there was one sister of my father's that went out to Palestine to work on the land before 1932. We never met her. We never knew that part of the family. But we were aware of the fact there was somebody there. So we understood that he was out of Russia.

Now, the way he got out of Russia was because Stalin wanted to cooperate with Roosevelt and Churchill by sending some people to the Army, for the boots on the ground because they were losing to Hitler. So they needed people to fight. So he agreed to let some political prisoners out. They asked General Anders, who was one of the political prisoners, to create a Polish unit. That's the way that my father came out of Russia legally, more or less.

And he was part of the British Army. In fact, what he was, he was part of the unit that was in Egypt, stationed in Egypt. But at that point we just knew that he was free. He was out of Russia, which was important. Because we could not do anything about it. It was just something that gave us a little bit of hope.

And my mother, as I said, she tried to offer us to go to work in Germany because she felt as a Polish person -- as a Polish person because she thought that that would be safer because we knew that the Polish people could tell Jewish people much quicker than the Germans. She thought it might be safer. But they didn't take us because my sister was too young. So that didn't work out.

The next thing she decided that she would like to work for something like a German military camp. She applied for a job there because she felt if she was working for the Germans, she would have an ID showing that she was working for the Germans. And the Germans, whenever they stopped you in the street or raided your home, the first thing they wanted to know is that you're working; you're working for them. Everybody had to be working for them. The Pols as well.

So my mother finally decided to take the chance and apply to the German military camp, to work there. It was a little dangerous because they said they have to check your papers. And we lived in fear again not knowing what's going to happen. But in the end she did manage to get the job.

>> Susan Snyder: Not only hiding in plain sight but working for the enemy.

>> Halina Peabody: Right. The job was working in the kitchen, peeling potatoes for the German troops. But --

>> Susan Snyder: Did this enable her to learn any kind of information on what was going on with the Nazis or the front?

>> Halina Peabody: Nothing at all. We did not know anything.

>> Susan Snyder: It was simply an extra measure of protection.

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. And it did help.

>> Susan Snyder: Did she do this through the end of the war?

>> Halina Peabody: Yes. This was towards the end. What happened was they did raid our house. They came in the middle of the night, screaming and yelling. It was always very -- they always wanted to scare you. In the middle of night, always. Everybody out. So everybody obviously got out. And my mother just handed him the ID and he says, “Oh, no, you stay.” So all the people that were there, the only Jews stayed. They took the rest out and they took them into the Gestapo station and they checked them out. They were all ok. So they came back the next morning. But for us it was just very frightening and any little thing like that helped. So we were saved again.

As I said, we did not know what was happening in the front. We didn't know who was doing what. We simply went day by day. As I said, my sister was so sick. My mother was always worried. I continued going to school. I also worked a little bit. The neighbor, who was partially German, my mother felt the more everybody works, the better.

And then one morning when we woke up, it was complete silence on the street. We were on the main road and there was no clatter of horses. Usually there were horse and carts going. We just didn't know what was happening. We didn't know, as I said, what was going on on the front.

So my mother was lying in bed with my sister. I was standing by the window. As we were talking, suddenly there was a tremendous bang. Everything went black. And I started

screaming, "My hand, my hand." And my mother grabbed my sister, grabbed me by the hand, and we walked into the street. My hand was bleeding. My mother was looking around to see if there was anything to help with me because she was carrying my sister. There was nobody. So we walked up to the hospital, which was near. They picked me up and cleaned me up. They scared my mother very badly because they said it was a lot of dirt and my hand was -- you know, it was open wound. So they said that they might have to amputate my hand. Of course, that was my mother, you know, you can imagine what my mother's thinking.
>> Susan Snyder: You just survived all of this time.
>> Halina Peabody: She thought, yes. At any rate, she stayed over that night. They said that the Germans had apparently just disappeared and the Russians were coming in.
>> Susan Snyder: So the bombing was just fighting between the Germans and the Russians?
>> Halina Peabody: Probably.
>> Susan Snyder: It essentially ended the occupation. The Nazis.
>> Halina Peabody: Yes.
>> Susan Snyder: What happened -- how did you regroup after the war? First of all, did -- when you saw that the Germans were no longer occupying the town, did you then admit to the woman that you were Jewish?
>> Halina Peabody: The woman got killed.
>> Susan Snyder: She was killed?
>> Halina Peabody: We did not know. My mother went back with my sister. She found out that she was in the kitchen and the roof fell over her and she was killed. There was no -- you couldn't live there anymore. So the neighbor took us. We had nothing anyway. So she just moved over to the neighbor.
>> Susan Snyder: How did you sort of regroup after this?
>> Halina Peabody: I spent two months in the hospital. My mother was with the neighbor. I did say to my mother, you know, well, maybe now I can say who I am. And she said, you can't because there was a Pogrom. A few people came out of hiding and the Pols killed them.
>> Susan Snyder: Still anti-Semitism.
>> Halina Peabody: Unfortunately yes. I know that not everybody was like that but that was what happened in my town. So she said, you know, you can't say who you are; you've got to stay.

The nurses were the nuns. And they were wonderful. They saved my hand. So I'm very grateful for that.

My mother started thinking of putting in announcements to find my father because he had absolutely no idea that we were alive. So she started knitting again. She also got -- the doctor told her she had probably cancer. So she was diagnosed with breast cancer. So she had to have an operation as well. So she went into the hospital as well. The lady, the next door neighbor, was helping us.
>> Susan Snyder: So right after liberation, in 1945, 1944, 1945, she's diagnosed with breast cancer.
>> Halina Peabody: Yeah. She was operated on.
>> Susan Snyder: Did she reunite with your father?
>> Halina Peabody: Well, finally she put in an announcement and we found him. He sent my cousin who was in the British Army. He came and he managed to get us in touch with the Jewish agency. We went off to Krakow. And then we left and reunited finally in Berlin somewhere, in Munich, in Berlin. Eventually because my father was part of the British Army,

we went to England. We settled in England. And that's where I grew up.
>> Susan Snyder: When did your mom pass away?
>> Halina Peabody: My mother passed away in 1956. She was only 47 years old. She got cancer again. They tried to find it but, you know, in those days there were not those kinds of machines that could detect it. So she died very early.
>> Susan Snyder: You settled in England as a family. How did you get out of Poland?
>> Halina Peabody: Well, as I said, the way we got out of Poland is the Russians made some kind of an agreement that they would let the Jews out, the few that remained. We simply went with a group that the Jewish agency took care of us.
>> Susan Snyder: Backing up a little, when did you feel it was ok to tell people that you were Jewish or to stop posing as non-Jews?
>> Halina Peabody: Well, when we were in the camp, already going out of there, at one point they thought that we were Pols trying to pretend to be Jewish in order to get out of Poland.
>> [Laughter]
>> Halina Peabody: And my mother -- she said my husband's name was Izak. [Laughter] But finally somebody signed for us. So we finally got through. We went over the border. And then we had trouble getting tickets. The Germans refused to sell us tickets after the war. You know, it continued. When we got to Berlin, finally my father managed to get back and reunite with us.
>> Susan snider: One more question before I open it to the audience. So Eva had not seen your father in many years; in fact didn't even know him.
>> Halina Peabody: She was 2 months old.
>> Susan Snyder: Didn't know him. Knew of him. What was their relationship like? Was it difficult at first for them?
>> Halina Peabody: It was difficult for everybody.
>> Susan Snyder: You said you were your mother's partner and then your father came back.
>> Halina Peabody: That's right. I became the babysitter. It was difficult. Everybody was warn out. Everybody had a hard time to recover. But eventually, you know, got to England and found -- I found table tennis for me.
>> Susan Snyder: You were a table tennis champ, right?
>> Halina Peabody: Later. I played a lot of table tennis. There was no tennis available. I had wanted tennis. I didn't like water. My sister was the swimmer. I was not. But I loved tennis. To this day I watch it. I was also skating as a child. But we did a little bit of that, too, in England.

My table tennis eventually got me to Israel because I was sent to the Maccabiah Games which made me want to go back to Israel after my mother died. The second Maccabiah Games I went and I stayed there for quite a few years. And then because I worked for the American Embassy in Tel Aviv we ended up coming to the United States. I ended up here.
>> Susan Snyder: Let me open it up for questions. We have a few minutes. Yes, in front.
>> When you were a young girl in school and you went to school for two hours a day -- and thank you for sharing your personal story with us. Did you feel the sense that the other children would have not accepted you if you had told them who you were? Did you make any friends or did you keep to yourself? How did you as a young girl manage to keep it all together in a hostile environment?
>> Halina Peabody: I never told them. I had very good friends and they never knew I was

Jewish. I never would have told them. It would be too scary. I knew I had --
>> Susan Snyder: You were old enough to know but still pretty young.
>> Halina Peabody: Well, you grow up very quickly, very fast.
>> When you went to Israel, did you ever become observant?
>> Halina Peabody: No. I was not observant from the home. So I was not observant but most Israelis are not observant. I never really had any problems on that score. And I feel that just living in Israel and being part of that culture was something that I needed to recover my own self. I go to Israel every year to sort of just be part of it. I have some family from my aunt there. I don't feel that religion has to be part of it. That's just my take on it. As I said, my mother said we all pray to the same God. I accept that.
>> Did you ever get to reclaim your childhood in any way?
>> Halina Peabody: Did I what?
>> Susan Snyder: Reclaim your childhood in any way.
>> Halina Peabody: No, I'm afraid not. I still miss my Shirley Temple doll.
>> [Laughter]
>> Susan Snyder: Back in the middle. In the red shirt. Right in the middle.
>> Is your sister still alive today?
>> Halina Peabody: Thank God, yes. She is alive. She has four children. And three grandchildren. She is in London. So I have no choice but to travel. [Laughter]
>> Susan Snyder: Go ahead back there. Then we'll have a couple in the front.
>> Thank you. And again, thanks for sharing your fascinating story. I was just wondering. With all the experiences you've had, what goes through your mind today when you see people being targeted violently for their religious beliefs?
>> Halina Peabody: Oh, God. I feel terrible about that. We do this work here, sharing our story, in the hope that it will alert people to be more vigilant and to work hard to stop this. We are too old to do it ourselves but I think sharing the story is the best we can do. I think we all realize that we are in a very, very scary world right now and that we have to work hard in order to combat it as best as we can. Each one of us can contribute. That's my contribution. I'm sure everybody else does their part. I think if we do that, we hope for a better world for our children and grandchildren.
>> Susan Snyder: Right here in front.
>> Do you have children as well?
>> Halina Peabody: I do. I have two granddaughters.
>> The reason I ask, I work with veterans. And many of the veterans that serve in the wars, they don't talk about their experiences to their children. I think what you did today is wonderful. I've enjoyed listening to you.
>> Halina Peabody: Thank you.
>> I just wondered if you share that with your children and grandchildren.
>> Halina Peabody: Absolutely. This was my greatest achievement that my granddaughter said she was going to make a movie about it. She likes to make movies. She's 17 now. So eventually I hope she will but she knows everything about my story. And that's what we all hope, to let the second generation know. That's why we go to schools. We tell the children so that they are aware of it.

As far as speaking is concerned, when I stopped working, I started volunteering here thinking I never, never had spoken in the public before. And slowly, slowly they kind of told me, you know, you ought to share your story. I think that goes for most of us. We were not

speakers. But eventually, you know, it felt that this was the right thing to do. We talked to the children. They tell us it brings the history to more life because it's not just the reading; it's also hearing an eyewitness story. So how can we not?
>> Susan Snyder: I just want to say -- I'm a curator here at the museum. We often get collections from people whose parents also didn't speak. We're very fortunate that the Museum has 60-some-odd volunteers who are Holocaust survivors who do speak. But the majority of them speak. There's a couple who still don't talk. I think it's not -- I don't want to say it's not uncommon but I think it's similar, a similar experience.
>> Halina Peabody: And some are very painful. Mine is painful but not as painful as some others. So I think it's harder for some people. And in the end you just learn how to speak and you just get into your memory banks and tell the story as it happened. I know that people want to hear.
>> Susan Snyder: Halina, we have a tradition -- I think we still have this tradition. We allow the survivor to say one last thing. I'm going to let you do that. Before I do, I just wanted to thank you very much for participating.

I'm going to ask two things of you. First, once Halina is done with her comments, we would love it if you would just stand up so our photographer can take a picture of Halina with you in the background. And the other thing that I would ask is that if you have other questions, please feel free to come up on stage afterwards and join us.
>> Halina Peabody: Ok. Well, I've already more or less mentioned that I'm speaking because I feel that this has to be my contribution to people, to warn them about being vigilant and to work so much harder for the better world for our children. We have to be strong and we have to work. We have to never forget what can happen if we are not. I just hope and pray that things will turn around and we will have a better world for the future.

I'm thankful to the museum for letting me reach such a wide audience so I can tell you what happened. That's why, you know, the Holocaust museum is my favorite place.
>> Susan Snyder: We're very grateful. Thank you so much.
[Applause]

[The presentation ended 12:03 p.m.]