UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
FIRST PERSON SAM PONCZAK
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Remote CART Captioning

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>> Edna Friedberg: You're all so quiet.

Good morning and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Edna Friedberg. I'm one of the museum's historians and I will be the host for today's *First Person* program. We are very pleased to be in our 16th year of this program of firsthand conversations with survivors of the Holocaust. Our *First Person* today is Mr. Sam Ponczak whom we will meet in a few minutes.

The 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 very grateful for their support.

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 through mid- August. The Museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person. Guests. So if you have friends coming to town, we hope you will share that link with them as well. Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the museums whether for programs here in Washington or around the country, inside your program booklet you will see a Stay Connected card. If you fill that out and give it to a staff member on the way out, not only will you be updated on events but you will receive an electronic biography of Mr. Ponczak to remind you of some of what you will learn today.

Sam will share his *First Person* account of his life during the Holocaust for about 45 minutes. After which we will have an opportunity for you to ask a few questions of him. And if he is willing, Sam to stay after a few minutes, we may even go a little beyond that time.

To orient you we have prepared a brief slide show by way of introduction. We begin with this portrait of Sam taken just after the war with his younger sister, Gisele.

Sam was born in December 1937 in Poland in the capital city of Warsaw, indicated here by the arrow.

Sam's father, Jacob, was a tailor and his mother, Sara, was a seamstress. These portraits were taken around 1940.

After Germany invaded Poland, September 1, 1939, starting World War II, Sam's father, not long after, escaped to Soviet-controlled territory.

To make sure we're all oriented, a reminder, after the invasion, the Soviet Union and Germany who were allies divided Poland into two areas of control. The experience of Jews was very different depending on whether they lived in Soviet or German territory.

Sam's father had moved on but for reasons we will discuss in the program, young Sam -- he was not quite 3 at the time -- remained in Warsaw with his mother, Sara. And in this picture we see German troops parading victoriously through the streets of Warsaw.

In October 1940, the Germans established a ghetto, a walled prison zone for Jews, in the city of Warsaw. The building where Sam and his family had lived before was in the area that now became part of the ghetto. So, in a sense, the ghetto was built up around them. In this photo, we can see a section of the wall. So a previous city street is now sealed off from the rest of the city.

Eventually, through complicated series of events and hard decisions, Sam and his mother were able to reunite with his father. They were soon sent to a forced labor camp in Siberia, in the Soviet Union, and then to a town called Syktyvkar, in the Northern Soviet region of Komi.

Finally, in 1944, they were sent to the Ukrainian town where Sam's little sister Gisele was born. They remained there for the rest of the war.

Here we have a portrait of the family shortly after they returned to Poland. And after many more moves, which we will try to get to today -- and I apologize if we have to rush through complicated history -- Sam eventually, by the 1960s, made his way to the United States where he became a successful engineer, married, became the proud father of three children, one of whom is here today, his daughter Racquel, if I can embarrass you by making you wave to people. Apparently as of this year, now has seven, not six, grandchildren. So we have a new baby to celebrate as well.

Please join me in welcoming Sam to the stage.

[Applause]

>> Sam Ponczak: Too hot.

>> Edna Friedberg: It is too hot.

>> Sam Ponczak: I hope everybody can hear me. In the back, you can hear me? Ok.

>> Edna Friedberg: Good. We'll be covering a lot of ground today; literally, far too much to do it justice, to do justice to any life in the span of one brief conversation. So please -- Sam knows we have an understanding if I interrupt him at times or have to cut him short, it's just so we can get as far as we can.

So let's begin at your beginning. You were born in December 1937 in Warsaw, which at the time was by far the largest Jewish community in Europe.

>> Sam Ponczak: True.

>> Edna Friedberg: One-third Jewish.

>> Sam Ponczak: There were about -- more than three million Jews in Poland at the time. They constituted about 10% of the population. So it's a large minority group, yeah.

>> Edna Friedberg: In Germany, Jews made up less than 1% of the population, in comparison sake. So it's a more heavily Jewish area.

Let me start by you telling us a bit about your family, your parents, extended family, their wife before the war, please.

>> Sam Ponczak: My parents come from small little towns in Poland. Some of them are hard to find even on the map. Youngsters made their way to Warsaw because that's where the action was. That's where they could learn a trade and start their young life in Warsaw. My father was a tailor and my mother was a seamstress. They didn't have much of an education. I think my father had about five -- finished fifth grade and my mother about fourth grade. They got married over a year before I was born. They spoke amongst themselves in Yiddish, Jewish language. Although they did speak Polish.

My father was involved as a young man with the trade unions, a typical thing for a tailor to do. My mother had three brothers that lived there with their families. The parents stayed in the old town where they came from. It was basically a poor life. They went through depression in Poland like everywhere else. I guess that more or less describes the life.

>> Edna Friedberg: How many siblings did your father have?

>> Sam Ponczak: My father had had actually four siblings. There were two brothers who emigrated from Poland in the 1930s to Argentina. One brother lived in Warsaw. And another brother, an older one from a different mother, he was old enough to be -- he took part in World War I.

What I know about him was that as soon as that war ended, he married apparently a German Jewish woman and he was not part of my father's life in Poland. The only trace I have of him was a friend of mine who visited the concentration camp found his name, David Ponczak, born in 1890-something. He died of pneumonia. It was interesting that a whole list of people who died that day, they all died of pneumonia in 1940 -- I don't remember, three or four. So that basically was death camp. They were put to death. The Germans had to write down cause. So that day it was pneumonia. Yeah.

>> Edna Friedberg: Before the war were your parents, grandparents, religious? Was Judaism important?

>> Sam Ponczak: My grandparents, I'm sure, were religious. My parents were not religious. They were the labor movement, unions, you know. They were educated, my father went to the Seder and he knew how to pray. When we were in Baltimore, he was conducting the Passover Seders and he did it religiously, the way it should have been done. Wouldn't let them tell him to cut it short, etc. He went through the whole thing. So even though he was not religious, he had lots of respect.

As a matter of fact, where I was born, the rabbi -- and here's my father, the lefty. And the rabbi became the best friends. He was telling me very often that he had lots of respect for him just like the rabbi had respect for him. Great accommodation.

>> Edna Friedberg: So you were not quite 3 years old when Germany started World War II by invading Poland. And Warsaw was subjected to very, very heavy bombing, high death tolls, massive destruction. What do you know from talking to your parents later -- you were too young to remember. What do you know about what they did and felt during those uncertain weeks and months?

>> Sam Ponczak: Of course, I personally don't remember. I was just too small. But what I do know comes from my parents or from reading some of what I think are reliable sources, historical sources. Warsaw was literally a naked city. It was bombed by the German Air Force, strafed. There was no position to that thing. As far as I remember the facts, there was about 20,000 people were killed during these months of bombardment. It was such that the dead had to be buried in parks, wherever there was a piece of land that they could be buried. And, of course, within a few days, there were shortages of water and food and electricity. So it was a miserable time.

According to my mother, apparently my building was hit in some part and there was a family that was killed in that apartment that was hit.

Of course, you know, recently I was thinking about my parents. They were in their 20s, late 20s, and they had a kid on their hands and there was a situation where nobody knew what was going to happen, what to do. The Polish government ran away on the third day of the war. They found their way through Romania to England. There was nobody in charge. There was some military that they tried to fight, the Germans. But the Germans walked into Warsaw, I believe, in the 20-something of December. At the same time, because of the pact between Hitler and Stalin, the Soviets attacked Poland from the East on the 17th of September. So Poland ceased to exist.

I was thinking, if I would be in the shoes of my parents, I wouldn't know what to do. So they decided that they would split. They didn't divorce but my father wanted to right away run to the Soviet-occupied part of Poland because he felt that it's safer. My mother in turn, she didn't want to leave her family behind. They had an agreement -- the postal system worked so they must have somehow communicated. So it went on for a while.

Of course, at some point in time my mother, as we would say, saw the light. She realized that there's not much future hanging around in what became the ghetto. She tells me that one day she made it to the train station. From what she tells me -- am I getting ahead of myself?

>> Edna Friedberg: No. Keep going.

>> Sam Ponczak: The Jews were not allowed to travel at the time. Well, she made it. And I don't know how. She was resourceful. Made it into a wagon. Luckily, she says, there was a priest that planted himself in front of her and told her to take the arm band off.

>> Edna Friedberg: The arm band that marked her as a Jew.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. With the star. And they were around asking for identifications. He said, “The woman with the kid is from my parish.” I believe that this unknown priest saved my life. I am sure that my mother didn't make any arrangement for the man to be there. I think it's purely coincidental that he happened to be there and he did what he did.

Now, don't ask me how we made it because the goal was to get to the river boat which was the demarcation line between the Soviet part and the German part. She planned it because to be there, it was the end of the year, probably November.

>> Edna Friedberg: 1940.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. Right. And to be able to cross over the river because the river was typically frozen at that time. It was a terrible winter. The river, indeed, was frozen. The thing she tells me is that she picked a night -- of course, at night -- to walk across because you won't see. Because we could have been shot by either the Germans or the Soviets. They didn't know who was coming. Well, she tells me a sad story about myself; that I was having lots of fun and she kept slipping and falling down and I thought that was hilarious. And I was laughing very loud. And, of course, that's what she was afraid, that I was laughing because it was heard. So she tried to give me something to do, something to take care of. I did. I tore them apart by the time we made it to the other side. And now it's my wound. I carry that guilt of destroying all the [Inaudible]. She was telling me about some dogs, the guards. Of course, I don't remember these details.

Eventually we were connected with my father. It must have been the middle -- we probably lived some time in that area where my father lived in Western Belarus but eventually we were sent to a labor camp in Siberia. It was from reading later on I knew it was a place where the Gulags existed. And it was known from the time of the czars, a Gulag place. And that's where I became self-aware, about four years, maybe four and a half years, as a kid, where I was and remember pictures of that place.

>> Edna Friedberg: If I may interrupt for a minute. I think most of us are much more familiar with the Holocaust trajectory of ghetto to death camp. But among survivors, Sam’s story is more typical. Of the three million Polish Jews from before the war only about 250,000 were still alive at the end of the war. The vast majority of them survived because they ended up in Soviet territory.

>> Sam Ponczak: That's true.

>> Edna Friedberg: Where the situation was different.

>> Sam Ponczak: It's a telling number because Jews were desperately trying to leave. And it just so happens that no country would accept them. And whoever was lucky enough to be in the Soviet Union at least had a chance to survive. And that was our fate.

I remember the labor camp. My father, the tailor, became a lumberjack. The reason is because that camp was in the middle of the Siberian jungle, if one can describe it. They had lots of trees. They needed the wood to be cut and to send down the river to whatever place that it was going to be used in. Whatever the wood was being used for. So I do remember that camp.

Many years later, I think in one of my travels, I did talk to my father about that camp because I did remember it. I was struck by the strange faces, the look of people. I remember it was something strange about that place. And I had a discussion with him. And he was telling me, look, first of all, it was a labor camp, physical exertion; a lot of people are not used to that, physical effort.

>> Edna Friedberg: And they were forced.

>> Sam Ponczak: They were forced to do it otherwise they couldn't get any food.

Second, there was depravation in the sense that there was no tobacco. People in those years smoked. You know somebody who is deprived if you smoke is behaving strangely. And some like to drink vodka and there was no vodka. And they used to drink cologne. It's strange but there was no vodka. There was no tobacco but they smoked bark or some moss. You wondered that people were miserable. There was high death rate.

I do know that it was a mix. It wasn't just Jews. There were Pols and all kinds of other people. The natives that we got to meet, they are of Mongolian kind of descent. They spoke a

language that is hard to describe. Apparently I started to learn that language. Apparently that was my first conscientious language.
>> Edna Friedberg: Can you describe a little bit the living conditions there? Were you with your parents? What was the food like?
>> Sam Ponczak: I do remember living -- I don't know how many of you know. It's like a Mongolian tent. I don't remember the arrangement, whether it was outside the camp or inside. The point is that there was nowhere to escape. Nobody could escape even though there was no wires, barbed wires, etc. Where would you escape when everything else is a thousand miles from you?

Anyhow, so I remember that. There was an old native person there, lady, that lived in it. I remember it must have been winter where the snow almost covered the tent. Just curiosity. It was interesting that the door was opening inward instead of outward because nobody would go out if the door was opening outwards.
>> Edna Friedberg: It was snowed in; it was so remote.
>> Sam Ponczak: It was remote. And, of course, I remember we had to open the door and my father would spend hours digging us out from the snowfall.
>> Edna Friedberg: How long did you remain in Siberia?
>> Sam Ponczak: Well, later -- from that later camp we were sent to the capital city of the republic, Syktyvkar. That's where my father was engaged to work in the factory, sewing uniforms for the military, and so my mother. In Syktyvkar, I also -- well, we lost my two twin brothers.
>> Edna Friedberg: Can you explain? We hadn't heard about brothers before.
>> Sam Ponczak: Yeah. They died. I remember them. They died when they were 2 months old.
>> Edna Friedberg: Your mother became pregnant while you were living there.
>> Sam Ponczak: Right. I don't know why they died. My mother didn't want to talk about it. I don't know.

So we stayed there -- and, of course, that's when I learned my first language, Russian. And I became aware of the war. From the P.A. system, we would hear how the Russian brave Army was retreating and so on. And then Stalin, what happened. And then the Russian Army was going the other way.

In any event --
>> Edna Friedberg: The P.A. system, was this in school?
>> Sam Ponczak: Kindergarten or -- yeah, because they had to put me somewhere.
>> Edna Friedberg: While your parents were forced to work.
>> Sam Ponczak: They were working, right. Yeah. So we lived there until about 1944. And then the government sent us to Ukraine because Ukraine was already liberated from the Germans. The reason, I found out later, was that my parents chose not to take the Soviet citizenship, which was offered by the Soviet government, but they wanted to return to Poland to find out what happened to the families. They did not know. So they chose not to do it and because of that they sent us Ukraine.

And then for some time my father worked on a farm. He was driving a combine. And then we were moved again, where my sister was born.
>> Edna Friedberg: So you covered a lot of ground and not by your own choosing. Your mother takes this big risk to leave Poland.
>> Sam Ponczak: Right.
>> Edna Friedberg: You're sent to Siberia. You're sent north. The Komi Republic is by the Arctic Circle, so we're really talking about a remote, desolate place, and then back down to Ukraine.
>> Sam Ponczak: Right. There's a couple of interesting events that I remember if I have time.
>> Edna Friedberg: Yes, please. It's your time.
>> Sam Ponczak: One day my father took me along to a place. I didn't know what it was but it was a big room. And the room was full of soldiers, young men in uniforms.
>> Edna Friedberg: Approximately what year is this?
>> Sam Ponczak: 1945.
>> Edna Friedberg: After the war.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right after the end of the war, right. I did not know what was going on but I saw these young men in uniforms crying. They were going like this. They were saying things. I didn't know where I was and what was happening. Many, many years later -- but I remember the event. I was asking father what was it. It was the first Yom Kippur after the war.
>> Edna Friedberg: A solemn day on the Jewish calendar.
>> Sam Ponczak: Right. Apparently these people were Jewish officers and soldiers who celebrated it in some room. I said, "Why were they crying?" He says, well, they just came from Germany and Poland and they saw what the Holocaust does.
>> Edna Friedberg: So they may have been camp liberators fighting in a Soviet uniform.
>> Sam Ponczak: Yeah.
>> Edna Friedberg: I'd like to back up if we could. I'm curious about given the fact that to this point your entire conscious life has been in wartime, shuttled around, in exile. When did you really understand that you were Jewish? And if you could tell us about an event at a flea market.
>> Sam Ponczak: Yeah. That was first time -- I didn't know I was Jewish or Mongolian or whatever. One day we went to a flea market, a farmer's market, to buy something. So it's my father, my mother and I. We were there. And I see an invalid. I mean, this man had no legs, was on one of those carts with wheels; obviously a wartime victim. He started to yell at us, "You dirty Jews," "How did you survive," you know. I didn't know what was going on. When I asked father what was going on, he said, "Well, I have to tell you; we are Jewish." So that's the first time I found out that I was Jewish. It's an interesting way to find out. During the war there was no religious life. I didn't see -- I wasn't old enough to recognize the difference from Jewish to non-Jewish. That was the first event that made me aware who I am.
>> Edna Friedberg: You mentioned your parents were understandably eager to return to Poland to see if they could find any family members.
>> Sam Ponczak: That's true.
>> Edna Friedberg: Alive. When did you return to Poland? Can you tell us about that trip?
>> Sam Ponczak: Yeah. So we stayed until winter. I suppose January 1946 we boarded some train, we and many other people, Jews obviously, who traveled to Poland. These were cattle cars, you know, open, in the middle of the winter.
>> Edna Friedberg: Open, no roof, exposed to elements.
>> Sam Ponczak: Yeah. It was open to the air like a regular cargo wagon. That trip was about three weeks of terrible cold. I remember I got some piece of coal in my eye. Anyhow. So we traveled about three weeks and ended up in the western part of Poland.

I just found out a few years ago -- I was trying to find out why we ended up there, where we ended up. That was an interesting story. I didn't think but Warsaw was literally destroyed, like 90% of Warsaw was leveled.
>> Edna Friedberg: During the war.
>> Sam Ponczak: Yeah. During the war. Right. Certainly the ghetto was completely leveled. But there was a plan -- you see, what happened before the end of the war, again, between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin they negotiated the map of Europe and they moved some borders. They gave Poland a piece of Eastern Germany. And Poland in turn gave a reward to the Soviets of the eastern part of Poland. And the plan was to literally move all the German population out. So that was my first exposure to ethnic cleansing. Now, it wasn't in the sense that they were killed but they were encouraged to pack up and leave.

So the eastern part of Germany, in a small town -- now it's lower Silesia, it was basically voided of people. Not 100% but most of the Germans. And I remember them going to the town I arrived at. So when we arrived at the town, the train I remember, saw the German signs, the sign of the town of Reichenbach-- still in German. We were told because they didn't have time to fix everything. So we arrived to Reichenbach.
>> Edna Friedberg: By fix you mean de-Germanize it.

>> Sam Ponczak: And then it was ethnic cleansed. I remember the long lines of elderly men and women, German women, going with their baby carriages loaded up with stuff, going to the train station. Obviously moving into Germany. I didn't see any young Germans, of course. These were little towns that were not strategically important. They were not destroyed.

We lived for some months with a German lady, elderly German Liddy, until she moved on -- lady, until she moved on of the it was first time we lived in an apartment, that I remember. Compared to my previous places of habitation.

>> Edna Friedberg: What was the Polish name of the town?

>> Sam Ponczak: The Polish name became Dzierzoniow. It is actually the name of a Medieval saying [Indiscernible], etc. It took a few years -- a little less before it was renamed.

Now, it was an interesting story because we are not the only family. It turns out that in that town, in 1946, there was about 26 or so thousand of Jews that suddenly showed up in this town.

>> Edna Friedberg: Go on.

>> Sam Ponczak: I found out recently, talking to some friends in Poland, about how come I ended up there. It was like it was designed to be this way. I found out, briefly talking, that a person who was a Zionist activist before the war and then became a social activist and political --

>> Edna Friedberg: Corroborator?

>> Sam Ponczak: He had the idea of resettling Jews who came from Russia in that area of Poland that was just given to Poland by Uncle Joe, Roosevelt, to make that like a Jewish enclave, like a Jewish republic or something like that. And that was the reason why many of these trains were sent into that part of Poland. And the town that I was in the largest Jewish population of any places in this Poland after the war. I mean, Jews lived in other towns in that area, too. Eventually it all collapsed and nothing of it happened but that was the intent. It turns out that he was the father of my good friend, Richard, with whom I went to school later on.

>> Edna Friedberg: Could you tell us a little about that community of Polish Jewish survivors who had suddenly been plopped down yet again?

>> Sam Ponczak: Yeah. They were all plopped there. They became very -- these people that survived, they're very active. I know that my father and a few other Jews decided right away to form a coop, some tailoring co-op and engage people in doing some work. Because he knew the trade. They found sewing machines in the houses. They were very entrepreneurial. They formed the co-op. There started to be truly a kind of Jewish life. There was a synagogue. There was actual newspapers. I'm told about a period of about two years after the war it was very active. I remember as a kid I was sent -- we had boy scouts, there was Jewish boy scouts. Around the town there were these farms, organized farms where Jews were farming, working with farmers. Jews were coal miners in other towns, a lot of things that we don't attribute, we don't think about these people.

There was also many orphans. At the same time the communities were formed, there was a movement of sending lots of orphans to Israel, to Palestine at the time. There was no Israel yet. And I do remember being -- spending months, a summer, in this boy scout camp where they taught us how to pitch tents, how to light fires, how to survive in the woods. It was good months of training.
People were reminding me they came from Palestine. They were Zionists. They tried to get all of these orphans out of Poland and take them to Palestine, eventually to Israel. Of course my parents didn't let me go with the other kids, so I stayed.

>> Edna Friedberg: I'd like to ask you -- you mentioned orphans. There are a lot of people who are just sort of scattered remnants of their family. Can you tell us about scenes you remember from the train station in this town, how people would go --

>> Sam Ponczak: Oh, yes. I remember my father used to take me at least twice a week because he knew the trains were coming. The main goal of the survivors was to find family and friends. So he would go with me when he knew the trains were coming. We would walk into this wagons and he would look around and see if he would find somebody, went to the next wagon. And that's --

>> Edna Friedberg: Looking for a familiar face?

>> Sam Ponczak: That's right. He found his friend from his little town, Wielun. He basically said, come on out, pull him out. There were two children there at the time. Because my father already was an organizer of the co-op and a tailor, said come on out; we'll find you a place to live, get you a job.

Well, the boy is a friend of mine who lives in Columbia, Maryland. Used to work for the Navy. And the sister is a successful businesswoman in Baltimore. Since that time they had two more brothers. So they became family. They became uncle and aunt.

Out of my family, no one except one cousin survived. One cousin who presently lives in New York. The story is similar to my story in the sense that my uncle, just like my father, made an agreement with his wife that he would escape to the Soviet-occupied Russia and my aunt and my cousin who joined him somehow. But the story of this uncle is different. They never met. So my uncle, apparently, decided to return to Poland to look for his wife and child. He never made it alive.

Now, my aunt and my cousin did make it to the Soviets and that's how they survived. So it's fate, I suppose. In my case, was kind to us. But in her case, no.

>> Edna Friedberg: I heard you talk about how you felt after September 11.

>> Sam Ponczak: Oh, yeah. Yeah. There was a Jewish community that was established. They had a building there. It was constantly people coming and looking for other -- looking for families. I remember seeing on the walls of the building, on the outside, you know, papers, have you seen such and such from such and such a town. I don't remember photographs but there may have been photographs. The whole wall was with handwritten notes. As mentioned somewhere, I don't remember, but it reminded me that in 9/11 when the building collapsed, I read or saw the same thing, the fences or walls were plastered with "have you seen":

"Have you seen" actually had a lot of impact on my work here. My mother -- our family was a rarity that the whole family as a unit survived because typically it was a man, a woman, or a child. Very rarely a parent or child survived. Most survivors were single, men, or women or children. My mother was a very hospitable. People would come, on weekends they would have dinners or lunches, whatever. The typical people were survivors, some friends, some friends of friends. They spoke Yiddish among themselves. I at the time understood. I didn't speak but I was old enough to understand. It was a rather sad affair because they often cried, drank vodka and cried because they tried to put out a lot of things out of their minds.

I remember on two occasions I met people who I later met in Baltimore. One of them was a survivor of Auschwitz. He was telling -- that's what I remember well, how the ones that were doomed and were led to the gas chambers, etc., they knew where they were going. If somebody says, no, they weren't aware, maybe the first few thousands. But these people knew. They would scream to the others behind the wires, “Do not forget us,” “Remember us,” “Remember us.” That was like, you know, you think about it, it was a last wish of people who knew.

Well, I remember these talks. And years later when I started to work here, volunteer, I was translating video tapes, videotaped interviews, of Polish people, Jewish Polish people. The interviews were done in the mid `80s, maybe `90s. The topic was the interviewees were people, Polish or Polish origin, who lived in the areas where the ghettos were formed, who knew the concentration camps, or knew the raids, things that were happening. And they were simply asked: Describe what you saw looking from outside. A few of the results I remember, the youngsters -- the people that were being interviewed were youngsters, teenagers at the time when the war broke out. So they were not adults in the sense, typically in their 20s, teens to 20s. And the few tapes that I translated described how this bunch of kids, boys, were laying around some road where Jews were being led to be executed in the forest somewhere. They described the old, the young, the children. And what they noticed was the people that were being marched, kids on the side of the road, "Pray to Jesus," "Pray to God," "Remember us," "Remember us." It clicked because I remember the same thing from years back. And in some ways it became my cause here to preserve the memory. That's why I translated the work here.

>> Edna Friedberg: Sam, I think sometimes in this era of immediate information it is easy for us to forget. But, for example, when your family was exiled in Siberia, they could not know what was happening in Poland. They didn't know what their family was going through.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. And to this day I only know -- there was a record that the Museum had shown that my grandfather on my mother's side was killed. But I have no information on the fate of family from my father's side or my mother's side other than that. No records.

It stands to reason because the destroying of Eastern Poland, where they were from, the Germans did not even bother to keep records. They were the so-called commandoes whose purpose was just to kill. They were killing squads. The German Army had special units whose job was just to kill. And they most likely, you know, were killed somewhere.

>> Edna Friedberg: The mobile killing squads Sam is referencing conducted mass shooting operations. We estimate that well over one million Jewish men, women, and children were not and buried in mass graves.

>> Sam Ponczak: Didn't keep records or names. There was no point.

>> Edna Friedberg: We have a few minutes left. A couple more things I would like to ask you about. In 1948, you did actually return to your birthplace of Warsaw with your father. Tell us about that.

>> Sam Ponczak: In 1948, my father took me on a train ride to Warsaw. I did not know at the time but the occasion was the unveiling of a monument that was built to commemorate the ghetto -- the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In 1943, in April, there was an uprising of the ghetto, the Jewish ghetto. The ghetto was being liquidated, people being sent to their death in various concentration camps. But the leftover decided that they will fight. There was a lot of material about historic fight. They fought almost literally to the last man, child, and woman.

Five years later a monument was built in their memory. So I was there witnessing the unveiling of that monument. I do remember David Ben-Gurion, who at the time -- no, Israel wasn't formed yet I think because it was April.

>> Edna Friedberg: Yeah. In a few weeks he would become the first prime minister.

>> Sam Ponczak: The state of Israel was going to be created. But he came and he gave a talk. He spoke in Yiddish to probably a few thousand men and women. I saw that monument. And then my father took me for a walk. He stopped at some point and he said, "I think this is the building where you were born." Because the Warsaw Ghetto was literally leveled.

I have to tell you something that you probably don't know. I was at the Polish Consulate library. There's a library in DC. A few months ago they showed a film that I went to see but before that film was shown there was a five-minute film that was made from an airplane, a small airplane. That film was made about a few months after the war ended. He was flying and with the camera they were filming the Warsaw Ghetto, the area of the Warsaw Ghetto. That film was filmed prior. It was interesting. I looked and I said -- it's interesting because what you saw was a large, flat area and at the edges of that area were remnants of buildings but standing buildings. So I knew that that area was significant. That was the area of the ghetto. Nothing stood up there. There was no remnants of walls standing up or what have you. It was literally obliterated to the ground. And only the areas of the edge of the ghetto was destroyed. They destroyed buildings but you could still see the structure of the building.

>> Edna Friedberg: Literally a scar on the landscape of the city.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. One cemetery, I guess you can say, yeah.

>> Edna Friedberg: We are almost out of time because I do want our audience to have a chance to ask questions. Your family stayed in Poland much longer than many other Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Until what year were you there? Why did you stay? Why did you leave?

>> Sam Ponczak: We stayed until 1957. It so happened -- I was asking that same question of my parents. Apparently they did get a visa to go to Argentina.

>> Edna Friedberg: Where your uncles were?

>> Sam Ponczak: Yeah. Right. But it just so happened that the Iron Curtain fell down before that, so forget it; you cannot leave the country.

In the meantime I completed high school in this town. And in 1957 there was again an anti-Semitic push because what happened was, if you remember, the 1956 campaign where Israel, the Arab forces, and, of course, the Soviet Union forced Poland to break relationship with Israel. They had

to light up more anti-Semitism stuff. At that time one of the things was to antagonize the Polish against the so-called Jewish -- basically saying to the unions, we don't want Jewish managers to manage Polish workers. So people were being thrown out from work because they were Jewish and so on. So it started as a mass exodus in 1957, about 50,000 or so Jews left Poland.

We had for many different reasons -- we originally were forced to go to Israel but we couldn't. We end up being in France for two years. And then half of the time in Italy because we had only a transit visa. So it was hard times.

Then after that, the French police arrested us and basically told us to leave. We ended up going to Argentina. I lived there for a good five and a half years. It just so happens that they wouldn't recognize my high school diploma. I wanted to be an engineer but I couldn't. They told me to go back to high school again.

So I made all kinds of efforts to come to the United States with my family. I was successful in getting my parents, my father, immigration status because he was able to get a contract to work from a company Hamburgers in Baltimore. I don't know how many of you are old enough to remember that. But he came as a tailor. I came as a foreign student which in a way, meant that I had no choice but to leave wherever I was going to after I finished my studies. Anyhow, I met my wife, Racquel's mom. We got married. I finished my studies. I got a job at RCA in New Jersey and later started a family. I came back to Maryland, worked at Northrop Grumman as an engineer. And then unfortunately in 1996 my wife passed away. I retired. I spend some time here, some projects. I have wonderful three children, married. I have seven grandkids. So, correct your numbers. It's not six. [Laughter] It's seven. And I hope for more. Yeah.

>> Edna Friedberg: Thank you.

[Applause]

>> Edna Friedberg: Sam has kindly agreed to take questions. We do have microphones around. If you have questions, please raise your hand and we will pass a microphone to you so that everyone in the room can hear.

>> Sam Ponczak: Only easy questions, please.

Yes?

>> Do you remember getting the news of the end of the war? And what was that like and where were you?

>> Sam Ponczak: Yes, I remember very well. Well, it was the 9th of May. It was near the town --

>> Edna Friedberg: In the Ukraine.

>> Sam Ponczak: In the Ukraine. There were three Jewish families. They were sewing, somehow made a living. When the news came -- they probably heard it from the radio. There was actually a Soviet officer that lived nearby. And all of these men got so drunk. I had never seen my father so drunk. And then, of course, I realized. I was old enough to know that the war ended. Yes, I remember that. My father being so drunk. [Laughter] He held his alcohol well.

>> Edna Friedberg: Other questions? Don't be shy. We have one here.

>> You mentioned how when you were younger and during the war and in the ghetto how there wasn't much religious activity. Was that just in your family or was that common during the war where you were?

>> Sam Ponczak: I would say it's my family. I wouldn't say it's common. Of course there were religious people. You're talking about the time when I was in Warsaw?

>> During the war.

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, during the war I was a small child so I personally don't remember. But I know from other Holocaust survivors who were in the ghetto that there was all kinds of activities. A lot was in educating the children not in the sense of entertaining them but taking their minds off of how they lived and what they saw. There was theater. There was a lot of trying to take care of the youngsters. But, of course, there were problems of children lying and dying on the streets. So that was not uncommon.

>> Edna Friedberg: If I could interject. I think part of what Sam is describing is a phenomenon we talk about as spiritual resistance. It's dramatic to think about people fighting with guns, violently. But all

over occupied Europe, Jews in ghetto and camps conducted secret prayer services, ran clandestine schools.

I don't know how many of you -- how many of you are going up to the Permanent Exhibition now? Ok. Good. So on the third floor, which will be your second level down, you will see a very large milk can, a rusty old can, which is an artifact from the Warsaw Ghetto where Sam was as a child which was used as part of a secret archive to collect and record the experiences and hopes and dreams of lives of the people who lived and died there. They hid and buried a time capsule underground, four of these milk cans, three of which were found.

>> Sam Ponczak: That's right. This was a very bright historian he was. He realized early on that what they are witnessing needs to be saved. They used the milk cans to pack handwritten notes, letters, etc. I know there were four. They found only three after the war. A friend of mine is translating from Yiddish into Polish or from Hebrew to Polish. Sara. She is working on the archive.

I was last year in Warsaw -- I don't know if you were with me -- at the place where he and his wife and his son, I think, were shot. They were hidden by a Polish family in a bunker. There were about 30 people there that were hidden but somebody denounced him. So we were commemorating his life and the job he has done. It was a very nice ceremony.

>> Edna Friedberg: In a moment I'm going to turn back to Sam to close our program. I know if you have other questions, he'll hang around for a few minutes after. But I do want to tell that you we will be having our *First Person* program every Wednesday and Thursday through mid-August. We hope you'll come back or encourage your friends and family to come back.

Before Sam closes the program, I want to let you know that Joel, one of our staff photographers, is going to be coming up here. And at the end when Sam is done, if you don't mind, if you would all stand up, we like to take a portrait of our special honored guest with all of you behind him at the end. So please do us that favor.

It is our tradition that the *First Person* has the last word. Sam?

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, my last word is I would like to make sure -- I am in the last generation of survivors; then it will be second, third generation, etc. And museums will be there but the memory somehow needs to be preserved for history not to repeat itself. I know that there is plenty of deniers but we shouldn't give them any room for that. That's what I ask you to remember. You will probably see a lot of things today and I just wish that you will tell your children and grandchildren that that's a cause that's an important cause to have in life.

Thank you. Thank you for listening.

[Applause]