UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
FIRST PERSON ESTELLE LAUGHLIN
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Remote CART Captioning

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>> Bill Benson: Good morning and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us today. We are in our 16th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Estelle Laughlin, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2015 season of *First Person* is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation and 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 through mid-August. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Today's *First Person* program will be live-streamed on the Museum's website. This means people will be accessing the program via a link from the Museum's website and watching with us today from across the country and around the world. A recording of this program will be made available on the Museum's website. This is our third time doing this with the others being in March and April.

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

Estelle will share her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows we will have an opportunity for you to ask Estelle questions. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Estelle is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

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

And Warsaw is highlighted on this map of Poland in 1933.

Estelle was the younger of two sisters. In addition to her parents, her family included many aunts, uncles and cousins. The Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Soon after the invasion, Estelle and her family were forced to move into the Warsaw Ghetto.

This photo was taken after her arrival in the United States.

in 1943, the family went into hiding in a bunker in the ghetto. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began on April 19, 1943, and continued until the final liquidation of the ghetto on May 16, 1943. Jewish fighters faced overwhelmingly superior forces of the Germans but were able to hold them off for a month. Estelle and her family were hiding in a bunker during the uprising and were among those discovered and forced out of hiding.

We see here a historical photograph of German solders leading Jews, uprising, to the deportation.

After they were discovered, Estelle and her family were deported to the Majdanek camp where Estelle's father was killed.

Estelle, her mother and sister endured labor in two more camps before eventually being liberated by the Russians.

Estelle, her mother and sister emigrated to the United States in 1947 on the Marine Flasher. We close with Estelle's immigration certificate which was issued in July 1947.

When Estelle, her sister and mother arrived in New York in 1947, they had $30 between them. Estelle and her sister went to work in the garment district. She met her husband, who was a survivor from Berlin, in New York. After marrying they moved to Cleveland where her husband was a labor organizer.

After the birth of her first son, Estelle began attending college in Cleveland and finished after they moved to the Washington, D.C. area in 1961, when her husband joined the Kennedy Administration. They have three sons. Estelle became a teacher in Montgomery County, Maryland, earned a Master's Degree and became a Reading Specialist. She retired in 1992.

Estelle's three sons are very accomplished: one is a professor of geology, another is a psychologist, and the third retired from a senior corporate position and now has a consulting firm. Between them, they have given her seven grandchildren, one for each day of the week, as Estelle notes. Estelle's husband died in 2008. She moved four years ago from the Washington, D.C. area to Chicago to be close to family.

Estelle volunteers with the Museum's Speakers Bureau. Until her 2011 move to Chicago, she was also a member of the Survivors Writing Group and a contributor to the Museum's publication, “Echoes of Memory.” She has recently written a book about her and her family's experience during the Holocaust entitled, "Transcending Darkness: a Girl's Journey Out of the Holocaust." It was published by Texas Tech University Press in November 2012. It was a finalist for the 2012 ForeWord Reviews Book of the Year Awards. She is now writing a work of fiction for young adults about the Warsaw Ghetto with a working title of "Hannah, I Forgot to Tell You." Following our program today, Estelle will sign copies of "Transcending Darkness."

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

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our *First Person* today. We're glad you made the journey from Chicago to join us again. Thank you very much.

>> Estelle Laughlin: I'm very glad to be here. I appreciate everyone's attendance here.

>> Bill Benson: You have so much to share with us, Estelle, and we have a short period so we're going to start right away.

You were just 10 when World War II began with Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Before we turn to all that would happen to you and your family during the war and its Holocaust, let's start first with you telling us a little bit about your family, yourself, and your community in those years before the war began.

>> Estelle Laughlin: My family was a middle class family. I was born in Warsaw, Poland. Warsaw shines in my selective memory and golden radiance of lilac trees against open blue skies, rich sounds of good neighbors, kindness, and faith and love. It was a rich life.

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, both from what you've shared with me and what I read in your book, you were extremely close to your father. Tell us about him.

>> Estelle Laughlin: My father was a very philosophical person, a very kind person, very inspiring person. He left an imprint on me that there is a fine line between the best in us and the worst in us and neither purges the other. He left in me a faith and goodness, the healing that we are all part of one another and to survive whole is to love humanity and be compassionate.
>> Bill Benson: And your mother, who had fled violence and anti-Semitism in her native Russia, tell us a little about your mom.
>> Estelle Laughlin: She taught me feistiness.
>> [Laughter]
>> Estelle Laughlin: My mother -- Jewish people were persecuted throughout centuries. My mother was chased out because she was of a different religion, was chased out of Russia when she was young. I think that she taught me what she learned about survival by being persecuted as much as she taught me what she learned about the beauty of golden fields of wry, taught her about appreciating beauty and she transmitted it to my sister and me.
>> Bill Benson: Germany invaded Poland September 1, 1939, and they attacked Warsaw that very day. What do youremember of that first day and the siege of Warsaw that followed?
>> Estelle Laughlin: It was a serene day. In spite of the fact that there was a lot of talk about war and the news about the Nazi aggression, in spite of, there was a lot of excitement. It's hard to believe that war can generate excitement and vibrance. There were posters throughout the city saying "We are ready," "United." But actually nobody was ready.

Nobody could imagine what war really was until it happened. One peaceful, sunny day, a bomb was dropped on Warsaw, several bombs, as a matter of fact. And actually parliament was attacked without declaration of war. And then for the next month bombs were raining on our heads. You never knew when a bomb would land on your building. Streets were littered with corpses. At night, these humungous planes would light up the sky. Bombs were just raining on us.
>> Bill Benson: You wrote in your book, quote, in an instant, at the age of 10, I and Fredka, 11 1/2, stopped being care-free children. We began to carry the tragic burdens of life, end quote. Can you say more about that?
>> Estelle Laughlin: I think in many ways it is very inspiring to know that young people are very wise and young people made decisions and made choices. They have tremendous resources. And I am always concerned when I share my story, concerned how it affects young people. And looking at the audience, I see a number of young people. So to the young people I want to say that as long as you are going to hold on to that which is best in you, to that which you believe is right and good, no matter what will happen to you you will be ok because you'll know that the strength of knowing that right is right and good is good. It's all in you.
>> Bill Benson: Warsaw held out for a month after the German invasion of Poland. You wrote that after the German Army marched into Warsaw on October 1, 1939, "Immediately my life changed beyond imagination." Tell us about some of the changes.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Our once peaceful streets were patrolled by foreign soldiers. They walked into our homes. They said the Jewish people, you know -- in order to be mean to people, in order to put people down, you have to demonize them. And they said the Jewish people are greedy and Jewish people are all the bad things in spite of the fact that they walked into our homes like common thieves or stopped us in streets and helped themselves to whatever they wanted to. They immediately closed schools. They made books illegal. They rationed all food. They stopped the electric power. We had no telephones, couldn't reach anyone, even in case of an emergency. We had no newspapers. We had no radios. We were cut off from the world and from virtually everything that was taking place.
>> Bill Benson: I was struck by something you said to me. You said that children helped by keeping watch for German soldiers and helping to hide contraband. Can you will say a little bit about that?
>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. With -- again, coming back to the resourcefulness that children have. Of course, you never know how smart and how resourceful you are until you are confronted with a problem. I think that we all find our strength and we all find our resources when we are put to test and we really know what we believe in and what we stand for.

I forgot the question.
>> [Laughter]
>> Bill Benson: That's ok. You had mentioned how already the kids were playing a role already.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. Well, I think the magic in children is that they hold on to their inner self. And no matter how terrible things were, we found ways to play. We also, while we played, we kept watch for the soldiers. When we saw a soldier in the distance, we quickly ran home and told our parents to hide quickly contraband like bread or a pencil or a book.
>> Bill Benson: It wasn't long before all the Jews of Warsaw were forced to move into what would become known as the Warsaw Ghetto. And you would spend your next three years in the Warsaw Ghetto. Tell us about your life in the Warsaw Ghetto.
>> Estelle Laughlin: They built a thick wall around us. They filled the ghetto -- the ghetto was tiny. I think it was like 30% of the city's population were restricted in 1/3 of the city's area. So it was very, very tiny. They filled the ghetto with people driven out from surrounding areas. Most people came without shoes, on foot, without a penny in their pockets. There was not enough housing. There was not enough food. There was not enough clothing. People were dying in streets. People were covering the bodies of dead children with posters saying "Children are the Holiest thing." Indeed, they are. Our children must live. And yet in this inferno, immediately the Jewish people organized themselves in self aid centers.

I am usually very mindful of stressing the fact that there was tremendous resistance. Sometimes people asked me why didn't you fight back. It's a very painful question, a very sad one. And I understand that it's meant well but we did fight back. We fought back with everything that was in us to hold on to our values, what we believed was good and right. There was no armed resistance for two reasons. One reason was that there were no -- there was no way of obtaining arms. Another one was that if you as much as whispered a word of protest, not only were you killed but your neighbors, the whole street they would pull out that that was a form of enforcing discipline and fear, would be killed. So the logical thing would be to just learn to have patience and hope that the war would be over.

But how did we fight back? To own a book was an act of defiance. All over the ghetto -- that was capital punishment. All over the ghetto there were hidden libraries. My father had a stash of his favorite books by Shalom Aleichem, Shalom Asch, nights covered with black covers to keep our existence secret. My father would pull out books and read to us. His voice would flow, swaddling us, bringing to world, remote worlds. Our room was like a capsule of paradise separating us from the curfew quiet outside our window.
>> Bill Benson: Still, you were, of course, under so many extraordinary, brutal restrictions yet you've told me you still found ways to celebrate holidays. And there was clandestined art and theater taking place in the Warsaw Ghetto, which, incidentally, were 400,000 Jews in that enclosed space.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. They were hidden all over the ghetto. There were brave teachers who risked their life to teach children in tiny little rooms to hold on to their faith and love and faith and humanity. There were theaters. Imagine theaters when there was no bread. There was a very remarkable historian and author in the ghetto, Haim Kaplan. He said it was strange, that when we seem to not need it at all, we need poetry more than we need bread. And it is true. The soul needs to be fed, too. The soul needs to be nourished, too.

You mentioned the holidays. Guns hovering over our heads did not stop us to celebrate holidays. On Passover we made sure that there was Matzoh in every house. And, of course, that was only possible at the beginning but not later.

There was not a child that I have known who was over the age of 10 who did not do something to help those who were suffering more than they themselves suffered. We put on clandestined shows to raise money for the more needy people. So that was our form of fighting back. I think it took a lot of courage and determination.
>> Bill Benson: And your father, as you mentioned, was a philosopher. He believed books were important to have. He believed in theater. But you said that your mother focused more on practical ways to survive. Say something about your mother's role in there.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yeah. My mother was more focused. I think you referred to examples that I gave, that I once shared my lunch with a beggar. I gave it away. And my mother's response was, "You know, we don't know if we'll have bread tomorrow and we have to be sure that we maintain our health so we'll be starving, you'll have some flesh on you. So if you want to share things, make sure you ask me for more food so that you don't give yours away." My father's response was: "You know how hungry you were not eating one lunch. You can't imagine how hungry the child that you shared your sandwich with was, so you did the right thing." He said, "Of course your mom said it to protect you but you did the right thing." So, yeah.
>> Bill Benson: And your mother was, I think, very worried, absolutely rightfully so, about disease outbreaks.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. She was on a rampage to clean the house.
>> [Laughter]
>> Estelle Laughlin: And make sure that everything is clean. She even – occasionally -- of course, we had no chocolate but occasionally we would have a piece of chocolate. She even washed the chocolate.
>> Bill Benson: In those circumstances, how did you find food? How did manage to eat?
>> Estelle Laughlin: That's a very interesting question. The food allowance, the rationed food, was about less than 10% of the daily required calorie requirement. Most of the people were dying of starvation. But there was also illegal smuggling. So we had that wall and the wall was topped with, with broken glass and barbed-wire. But there were smugglers. The best smugglers were children, mostly boys no older than 6 or 8. They were like little mice, remove bricks under the wall and crawl through the wall. When they were caught, they were killed. If they were not caught, then their parents had a meal that day.

Of course, the starvation was so profound. There was also official smuggling. By that I mean that there were big smugglers. And they were Nazis and Polish guards who lined their pockets with bribery. And for that they would open the gate and the guards would look the other way and wagons of food would be smuggled through. So there was smuggling.
>> Bill Benson: The Nazis started deporting large numbers of Jews out of Warsaw to death and concentration camps in 1942. For a substantial period your family was able to avoid being deported. How did your parents manage to protect all of you from being taken and sent to camps in those years of 1942 until 1943?
>> Estelle Laughlin: The deportation began July 1942. The month of my 13th birthday. It was carried out with 20th century know-how and Stone Age values. At first we had no idea that deportations meant death. Jewish people -- some of them were forced to write letters saying that they were in camps where they were fed and sheltered. So you can imagine that many people who were living in streets, who were homeless, who were famished went voluntarily and unknowingly to death. But many people hid.

And where does one hide in an apartment building? Usually no different than children play hide and go seek. We hid behind couches, between mattress and box springs, in cardboards, in drawers. Any little corner that you could find. My family obscured one room by putting a wardrobe in front of the door. And this is how we hid. It was random luck.

From July 1942 to September 1942, a mere two, two and a half months, 99% of the children were deported and killed. Can you imagine a world without the sound of children, without the presence of a grandmother or a grandfather? Because old people and children were the first to be killed. At first, we had no idea. But the people that were torn away from us, we never heard from them but some people managed to come back. They did it during the night and found their way. They hid on the corpses, on the ashes, and they found their way back to Warsaw, to the ghetto. And they told us about the horrific train rides to a place called Treblinka where our people were gassed, children were gassed.

It's hard to imagine how human beings who have mothers and sisters, who love their children, could do such things. I think this is the reason why I'm sharing my story. And I believe that this is the

reason why you are here, to be reminded the cruelty we are capable of and perhaps that will remind us of the importance of love and compassion.
>> Bill Benson: In essence, Nazis decreed that children under the age of 14 were useless to them; so had to go.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.
>> Bill Benson: You were 13. How did you manage to not go?
>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, most of it was random luck.
>> Bill Benson: Random luck.
>> Estelle Laughlin: If they come in and scoop up people -- I think towards the end they picked up enormous numbers of people. So it was almost like when you sweep the floor and some dust would just remain. It was mostly random luck --
>> Bill Benson: As I remember, your parents also tried to make you look a little older. Didn't they?
>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. I had braids. My mother cut my hair short, my hair up, and dressed me to look older. But I was afraid. I was very afraid. I asked my father what would happen if they found out that I was only 13. My father said, "Oh, I'll never let them take you away from me." "I'll burn their eyes out with acid." I believed him that I was safe if only in his love because I knew that he was helpless.
>> Bill Benson: The ghetto, at the start of 1943, the ghetto was subdivided into three sub ghettos.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.
>> Bill Benson: That's when you went to work in a factory.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the work, how you were able to do that.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Ok. Now, the deportations -- the people just disappeared. At the point when there were very few people left in the ghetto, only the ghetto was reduced to three sub ghettos which were three separate streets. So all of the ghettos were just three segments of streets.

The only people who could live -- I mean, we lost our rights to live. And the only people who were still permitted to live were the ones who were working in factories. So my mother and sister and I got permission to work in a factory. My father was not. These were called the wild people. And so there were numbers of wild people who were living, hiding, between us, among us.

There were so few people left. Warsaw was an ancient city. And most people lived in apartment buildings. We were the only family in the apartment building left. There was such silence. The silence was palpable. I would sometimes stick my head out the window or the door hoping to hear other neighbors but all I could hear was really silence growing towards me.
>> Bill Benson: Your family and your father were called a wild one because he was not able to have a work permit but you were still in the ghetto when the remarkable Warsaw uprising took place. And then, the subsequent horrific obliteration of the ghetto. Tell us about the Warsaw uprising and what happened to you and your family.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, I mentioned that some people managed to get back and tell us about Treblinka. When we found out what was happening to the people, that they were gassed, the remainder of the people in the sub ghettos began to organize themselves in armed resistance. My father was a member of the armed resistance, too. And they started to build bunkers. The bunkers were in the basement. They built a network of bunkers. And they also dug tunnels to lead them to navigate between the bunkers. And they also used sewers and tunnels for the other side of the wall, to obtain arms to fight back.
>> Bill Benson: Your family was also able to build a bunker. Tell us about the bunker that you had.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. So imagine that, you know, that your existence on top of the earth is going to cease and that you are going to crawl and live in the netherworld. Our bunker, the entrance to our bunker-- we moved from our second-floor apartment to the ground floor and our bunker was -- our apartment then was on the ground floor. And the bunker was in the basement. And, of course, you had to have a secret entrance to the bunker. Our entrance to the bunker was the powder room floor and commode. All would lift and then you would go down into the bunker.
>> Bill Benson: You would lift the commode up to --

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right, to go down the steps.

Events erupted with Nazi soldiers marching into the ghetto, with armed cars, with tanks, with a flux of bomber planes, and with humungous loud speakers announcing that we better report for deportation or else they'll kill us all. They called it resettlement. We knew what resettlement meant so we just opened the trap door, walked down the stairs. It was a flimsy ladder, pulled the trap door down. I felt cut off from the world. I felt trapped. The damp walls closed in on me. The damp cell pressed down on me. The flickering of the light was our substitute for the sun. The ticking of the clock was our only reminder, our only clue when morning was rising, when sun was setting. How I missed the open horizons, just the blue crispness of day.

And while we were -- I'm anticipating your next question.

>> Bill Benson: Go ahead. [Laughter]

>> Estelle Laughlin: And while we were in the bunker, fighting erupted on the streets, facing a 20th century Army, armed from head to toe, facing tanks and facing armored cars and facing flocks of planes was a handful of poorly clad, poorly fed, poorly armed [Indiscernible]. They climbed up on rooftops. They stepped in front of open windows. They crawled out from the bunkers, from the sewers to street corners and lobbed Molotov cocktails, hand grenades, fire throwers, whatever they had. It is noteworthy that it took that group of fighters longer to fight than it took for France or for Poland to capitulate.

>> Bill Benson: If I understand correctly, after an initial clash, Himmler said we're going to close down the ghetto in three days as --

>> Estelle Laughlin: As a gift to Hitler for Hitler's birthday.

And you know, the deportation, the uprising, the dates set to cleanse the rest of the ghetto of Jews started the first Sadr, first high holiday.

>> Bill Benson: That's the day they picked.

>> Estelle Laughlin: They always picked holidays.

>> Bill Benson: Eventually, of course, you would be found. How did that happen?

>> Estelle Laughlin: At some point a grenade was thrown at our bunker and we were pulled out. At that point there was no corner, no place to hide anymore. They drug us through the streets. Flocks of planes, the sky was black with planes, bombs were falling all around us, buildings were crumbling to our feet. Flames, enormous flames, were licking the sky in and painting it in other worldly colors of iridescence. Earth sauntered. They dragged us to Umschlagplatz, the deportation. They loaded us on to freight trains. We were on the train through the night. And just for the sport of it, soldiers were shooting at the trains. People in congealed blood all around us.

>> Bill Benson: When we showed the pictures earlier, the slide show, there was the one historical shot of a picture of Jews being pulled out of the Warsaw Ghetto. And there was a family in the front. It was just so easy to picture that being you, your mother and your father, your sister in their place.

>> Estelle Laughlin: You know, we were not a swarm of nameless people. We were people like everyone. There were mothers. There were mothers holding on to hands of children that they wanted desperately to take home and tuck them into bed. Children sometimes ask me how did you feel inside. Inside me I felt no different than my grandchildren, than all children feel like. I, too, wanted to catch a ball soaring through the air. I, too, wanted to take my family and my friends for granted. I, too, wanted to feel the damp grass under my feet.

>> Bill Benson: As you --

>> Estelle Laughlin: I also want to point out that some of the people held a gun only an hour earlier.

>> Bill Benson: So you were then taken to Majdanek where you lost your father. Tell us what you can.

>> Estelle Laughlin: So in the morning we arrived in Majdanek, which is an extermination camp -- there is a slight distinction between extermination camps and slave labor camps. Slave labor camps -- both camps, slave labor and extermination camps, were encircled by electrified barbed-wire fences, guards every few feet with beams of light following you. In Majdanek there was a crematorium and chimneys.

If that was not enough, in the assembly field they had a gallow and gibbet to scare us even more into obedience. People were dangling every day, our friends, like limp puppets. And, you know, we survived it all with holding on to our humanity and to compassion and joyful life.

My father was separated from us. When we arrived, men, women, and children were separated. My father sat with a group of men. My sister, my mother and I sat across the field from him. He was very sick at that point. He had fever. He sat in the front row so my sister and mother and I did. I looked at my father. He looked so ill. I was so used to looking into his eyes for comfort, for reassurance, for trust and he looked so pitiful. When the guards weren't looking, I ran across the field and kneeled in front of him and I said, "Daddy, you need not worry about me. They won't get me." I turned the lapel of my coat. Sorry. We had cyanide capsules. And I said, "Daddy, they will never get me." And he looked at me -- I'm sorry.

>> Bill Benson: No, no, no. Take your time, please.

>> Estelle Laughlin: I always felt guilty about it because I wanted to reassure him but he gave me strength to live.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about, if you don't mind, losing the photograph of your father. You had a photograph of your father.

>> Estelle Laughlin: The only treasure, the only thing that we had left in Majdanek -- that was before we had to shed our clothes and before we went through the selection in which a soldier dressed neatly with white gloves, would sort people, who would act like a pseudo guard, saying this one will live and this one will die. This was what selection was like.

I had a photograph when we were actually walking towards the showers. We knew about the showers. We knew that the showers were really gas. And when we walked into the showers, the water had a lot of disinfectant in it. So we had no idea whether it was gas or water. It happened to be water. We didn't shout. We didn't scream. Not because we weren't indignant. We were very indignant. I could have scratched their eyes out. But I did not cry because I wanted to spare my parents my tears. And also, I was too proud to show my tears. I knew that wasn't a thing that I could do. So I had this little photograph prior as we were going to the showers. And a soldier stopped me and said, "Tell me what are you hiding?" I said, "I'm not hiding anything." I hid the photograph in the lining of my shoe. I thought, well, if I lied to him and I say I have nothing -- I was afraid to lie. So I pulled out the photograph. I said, "It's the only thing I have. May I have it?" And he snatched it from me.

>> Bill Benson: I know this is really hard to do in the time we have, Estelle. Things were horrible for you at Majdanek. But from there you would also then be sent to several labor camps.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Your mother just played such an incredible role with you and your sister now, keeping you together and protecting you. Tell us a little bit about what you can and the events that led up to your liberation.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, in Majdanek, slave labor, digging from one place to another. The purpose of Majdanek was an extermination camp, an extermination factory. So the existence of it was to kill people. So there was no work so we just did useless work, which was very, very hard. My sister in Majdanek was beaten very badly. In my book I describe the circumstances.

You know, it's interesting now to think that I want to mention the poetry, writing, in case I forget.

So my sister was beaten very badly and she couldn't go to work the following day and so hid her under the bunks. The soldiers came and found -- whomever they found in the camp, they put you on the list. The assumption was if you were on the list, you were going to the gas chamber. We had a pact that if one of us go to the gas chamber, all three of us will go. So my mother and I traded places with two other people. And the following day, when my sister's name was called and the two other names, my mother and I reported. This is what saved our lives. We were put on a train and shipped to Skarzysko, which was a slave labor camp. The two people with whom we traded places, unfortunately probably never made it out of there.

I wanted to also mention that even in Majdanek when life was so torturous, we were composing songs and poetry. We didn't do it -- we had no pencils or paper so it was not to write it down; it was not for history but all that was really left was our ability to speak, to show our indignation to show -- to express our longing. So, yes, the soul always talks. The soul always feels.
>> Bill Benson: If you don't mind, as you were on your way to one of the camps, Skarzysko, the train stopped and you credit that with actually saving your lives. Can you say a little bit about that?
>> Estelle Laughlin: So another random luck thing. My sister -- the train stopped on the way from Majdanek to Skarzysko. My sister had to go to the bathroom. There was one stop. And then they started to shoot. We were rushing to get back on to the train. So we got in the wrong car which happened to be the right car because Skarzysko had three different camps. Each one of them was owned by a German arm factory. But one was producing gunpowder. And gunpowder settled in your skin where the people looked completely yellow and on your lungs, and people could live only like weeks or months so where they were completely disposable. And we ended up, because we went into the wrong car, we ended up in the camp where we were working on bullets.
>> Bill Benson: And you would end up at another camp yet --
>> Estelle Laughlin: Which was essentially the same.
>> Bill Benson: You were there, I think, when you were liberated.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. So imagine a miracle. This is after all of these years from September 1939, this is January 1945, Poland is very cold, ground is covered with ice and snow. After all of these years. And we were so separated. We were so isolated. It was impossible to believe that only a few rabbit hops away from us people were sailing on silver lakes and children were sitting around tables with families like children should. And then after all of these years we hear this rumble of the planes, bombs falling. We say, oh -- I'm smiling now when I say we heard the bombs falling because, really, that was like from heaven. We were on death row, dying but allied bombs would be such a dignified death. And we kept on saying, when they paused, “Please don't stop,” “please don't stop.” And in the morning we were liberated.

Now, I want to assure you that liberation was not very unlikely -- like you are probably imagining it. In my book I describe it. A large portion of my book is about liberation because very little was written about it. I told you it was in January. All we wear is wooden clogs, loose -- there were no stockings, no scarves. It's amazing how much cold and hunger we can endure and still remain human. And in the morning the gate is opened and we shuffle out. It's icy. It's cold. The camp was surrounded outside the fence by no-man's land. We shuffled through this, not even an inkling of light. We come out and we hear soldiers. We didn't know whether they were German soldiers -- I don't know why we would suspect but we were always afraid of the wars. And we wanted to run because we knew that this was the front line. What if the Nazis come back? We could hardly move. We see the Russian soldiers and we run up to them. And we say, all teary-eyed, "Do you know how long we've been waiting for you?" It was like messiah was there. "Do you know how long we've been waiting for you?" And they said, "We have a war to fight."

That was January. The war wasn't over until May, I believe. And they did have a war to fight. And they said -- they looked at their watch and they gave us a slab of bread. They said, "You better find shelter because there's curfew." At that point I don't know if we were more afraid of dying of cold and starvation than being arrested for breaking the curfew. So we shuffled out. We looked so dreadful, covered with lice and mange. And the people were really turning away from us. There were no displace persons camps. We were so hungry. And we encountered some other people from the camp. They said, “Down the street there is a pickle factory and you can go there.” So we climbed through a broken window and our first meal was a dill pickle.
>> [Laughter]
>> Estelle Laughlin: We were very grateful for it.
>> Bill Benson: Estelle, we're almost at the close of the program. I think we have just a couple of minutes for some questions. Shall we do that?
>> Estelle Laughlin: Sure.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to start, before we do that -- ok. We'll look for anybody who has a question. We have a question right here. We're going to bring you a microphone so that everybody in the room can hear it. Once you have the microphone, make your question as short as you can, if you don't mind. That way we'll have time for Estelle to give you an answer.
>> Hi. Thank you for sharing your story with us. I was just wondering if after everything that you have gone through, have you ever been back to Warsaw?
>> Bill Benson: Have you been back to Warsaw? I want to make sure everybody in the back hears that.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes, I was. A year ago I went with a presidential delegation to Warsaw. I came back to the street where I was dragged out from the bunker. I came back -- when I left, the place, Warsaw, was engulfed in flames. I came back as an American citizen with the delegation of a country that represents what is noblest in freedom, equality for everyone. So that was a very moving experience for me.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you. Do we have another question? We have one in the back. Here comes a mic to your left.
>> Thank you so much. You mentioned random luck two times. And you said the end of liberation was a miracle. Did anybody ever talk about God?
>> Bill Benson: You've mentioned random luck and the miracle of liberation. The question is -- was there talk about God's role in all of this?
>> Estelle Laughlin: You know, God and religion is a very personal thing. During the war there were many people in the ghetto who held on to their faith. Other people -- my family was not religious. I am a very spiritual person. I feel very connected to everyone and everything that is living. For some people it was very hard to believe. The indignation, how could anyone, how could God permit children to be killed? On the other hand, there were others who held on to religion saying, thinking, that religion presented the unity of all man, in the eyes of God we are all his children no matter what we believe. So yeah.
>> Bill Benson: I think we're probably almost out of time. Is that a hand up? One more question in the back. One more question. We're going to get you a mic so we can hear you.
>> When you got into the concentration camp, did you write any of the poems?
>> Bill Benson: Did you write any poems in the concentration camp?
>> Estelle Laughlin: No. I did not. My sister was the poet in my family. Although I like to write poetry, too. Yes.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you for that.

I'm going to turn back to Estelle to close our program in just a moment because it's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person has the last word. But I want to take the liberty of reading to you something from Estelle's book if you don't mind. In her book she wrote, "Our survival depended 99% on random luck and 1% on instinct and grit. Without the 1% luck, you are 100% dead."

Before I turn back to Estelle, I'm going to ask you to bear with us as Joel, our photographer, will come up on stage. He's going to take a photograph of Estelle with you as the background. So I'm going to ask you to stand so we can get that photograph. It's really a nice image. Not yet. Not yet. I'm going to -- Estelle will close our program for us. Then Joel will come up on the stage.

Thank you for being with us. We'll have a first program every Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. Hope you can come back or come back in a future year.

Estelle?

>> Estelle Laughlin: I want to thank everyone for coming to this museum. Seldom are people willing to speak about such events. Seldom are people willing to listen to such events because they generate such pain. But we have to be reminded from time to time what can happen to us, what can happen to humanity, what can happen to the conscience of a nation, and what can happen to love and trust if we accommodate ourselves to tyranny. I feel as long as there are people who are saying that the Holocaust never occurred in some ways Majdanek is still with us. I want to thank this wonderful

museum for reminding us that history always remembers and we must listen if civilization is to progress.

Thank you again so much.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Estelle.

[Applause]