United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
First Person: Sam Ponczak
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>> Edna Friedberg: Good morning. I think that's a first. Usually, I have to come up here and tell everyone to shush. Suddenly there was a silence. I needed to come. Good morning. Welcome.

Welcome to the museum and welcome to the First Person program. My name is Edna Friedberg. I'm one of the museum's historians. I will be your host today. Just so Sam, our guest, and I have a little sense of who we're talking to, can you shout out where you're from? Maine! Wisconsin! Ohio! OK. Go Midwest. Great. Thank you.

>> Illinois!

>> Edna Friedberg: Illinois. My home state. Thank you. Washington. Texas. Thank you. Sam, we have a lot of people. Good. I don't think we've done that before, but it's nice to know that you are from all over. You're very lucky today. Our First Person today is Mr. Sam Ponczak, whom we will meet shortly. The museum is in its 17th year of the First Person program.

The 2016 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. We're very grateful for their sponsorship of this special program.

First Person is a series of conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand account of their experiences. Each of our First Person guests serves as a volunteer here at the Holocaust Museum, and our program will continue twice weekly through mid August.

The museum's website, www.ushmm.org, listed on the back of your program booklet, lists information about each of our upcoming First Person guests. Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the museum and its programs can complete the card, the Stay Connected card that's in your program, or speak with a representative at the end of the program.

When you join our e-communities, you will receive an electronic copy of Sam's biography, so that you can remember and share his testimony with people back home after you leave today.

Sam will share his First Person account of his experiences during the Holocaust for about 45 minutes. After which, we will have an opportunity for your questions. If you think of something during the program, keep it in the back of your mind and I know he will be very happy to talk with you.

In addition to the people in this room, today's program is being live streamed on the museum's website. This means people will be watching the program via a link from all around the country and even around the world.

A recording of this program will be made available later on the museum's website. If you enjoy today's program and would like to hear others, you can watch some of these once you are back home.

For our web audience, listening in, if you would like to use Twitter to ask a question, send a picture, or write a comment during the program, feel free to do so using the hash tag #ushmm.

Enough of the housekeeping. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Sam is one individual's account, one individual's experience during the period of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help orient you to Sam's story.

We begin with this story of a young Sam Ponczak, and his sister Gisele, taken in 1946.

Sam was born in 1937 in Warsaw, the capital of Poland, and that's indicated by the red arrow here. Here we see Sam's parents, his father, Jacob, was a tailor and his mother, Sarah, a seamstress. These portraits were taken in 1940. Is that right?

Germany started World War II by invading Poland on September 1, 1939. When war broke out Sam's father escaped to Soviet controlled territory. While young Sam and his mother remained in Warsaw. In this photo, we see German troops parading through Warsaw after the surrender of Poland.

In October 1940, the Germans established a ghetto in Warsaw and decreed all Jewish residents move into this walled-off area. We see here a photo of the wall that separated this section of the city. So it's a sort of urban prison, a neighborhood enclosed in the center of the city.

The building where Sam and his family already lived was in the middle of the ghetto. I do want to mention this is a special date in history. Yesterday, April 19, marked the anniversary of the start of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which was a violent revolt started by Jews in the ghetto against the Germans, against all odds. It was the first urban uprising against Nazi Germany and was the largest and most symbolic of Jewish uprisings. A few thousand Jews held off, far outnumbered by German troops, for almost a month. So it is very significant we're talking about Warsaw today with Sam.

Sam's mother in November of 1940 took the risk to escape the ghetto. We'll hear those details in a moment.

Eventually Sam and his mother, pictured here just after the war, were able to reunite with his father. They were soon sent to a forced labor camp in Siberia, in the Soviet Union, then to a town called Syktyvkar in the northern region of Komi. Finally, in 1944, they were sent to the town of Kherson in Ukraine, where Gisele was born. The family remained in Kherson for the remainder of the war. This picture was taken of them after the family returned to Poland.

With that context, I would like to invite our very special guest Sam Ponczak to take the stage, please.

[Applause]

>> Sam Ponczak: Good morning.

>> Edna Friedberg: So you know, Sam and I have an understanding, we'll cover a lot of ground today, and at times I will likely have to interrupt him. He's not insulted. We just want to make sure we get through the full trajectory of what is a very complicated story.

Let's start at your start, your beginning. You were born in December 1937 in Warsaw. Tell us a little about your family, please.

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, my parents came from small little towns known as staples in Poland. They left the towns in their early teens because there was no work and living was hard. So they moved to Warsaw where they met. Actually, that's where my father learned a trade as an apprentice, that trade being a tailor. My mother as well.

Well, we lived in an area that later became part of the ghetto. It was very heavily Jewish populated. Actually, before the war, about 1/3 of Warsaw's population was Jewish.

>> Edna Friedberg: The largest Jewish area in Europe?

>> Sam Ponczak: That's right. Very diverse politically, culturally, and so on. My father was a, well, I guess a good tailor, and became also a union organizer or what have you. Even though he finished only, I think, either four or five grades of school, he was well versed in politics. He told me that as a young man he actually read "Das Kapital" the Bible of Marxist theory. Anyhow, that's about my parents.

My mother had a large family, three brothers and parents, brothers who were carpenters and shoemakers, what have you. From small towns. My parents were not, even though they were educated, in the religion, in Jewish faith, they were not really practicing Jews at the time.

>> Edna Friedberg: When war started in September 1939, you were -- I think my mic is off. OK. When the war started you were a baby, right? A toddler?

>> Sam Ponczak: Yes.

>> Edna Friedberg: What did your parents do days and weeks after Germany invaded?

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, the war started by aerial bombarding of Warsaw. There was not much anti-aircraft artillery. Basically, the German Luftwaffe had control over the skies and they burned, they strafed, they destroyed anything at will. To my knowledge, in that first months of war about 20,000 people were killed. Never mind wounded. And it was sheer bedlam, because on the third day, as far as I know, of course, things I'm telling you is what I learned later or from what my parents were telling me, on the third day the government disappeared. They just packed up, went to Romania, ended up in London. So there was no one in charge.

The hunger and lack of water, electricity came in very quickly. Sometimes I was thinking about my parents. There was a guy 29 and his wife, 28, Sara, and I was a toddler, and they probably did not know what to do with themselves, where to run. They did not know what was coming ahead.

So they made the decision that they will separate. Not divorce, but separate, because my father wanted to -- no, I must digress for a second. Germany attacked Poland on September 1. On September 17, I believe, Soviet Russia attacked Poland from the east. So by the end of September there was no Poland. It was either German occupied part of Poland or Soviet occupied part of Poland.

So my father decided to try his fate and escape to the Soviet occupied part of Poland. Most of the people did not know, but there was a treaty between Hitler and Stalin of nonaggression. So that was a deal that was basically unknown to the population. But the reality was very, very tough.

Anyhow, he escaped to the Russian side, and while my mother decided to stay because family ties, brothers, her parents and so on. So luckily, the pact allowed for a postal correspondence. So they apparently knew where they were, and I know during that time at sometimes my father was working as a tailor in the Belarus part of Russia. I was with my mother.

>> Edna Friedberg: They were able to exchange letters?

>> Sam Ponczak: I presume. Unfortunately, I was either too young or stupid to ask the right questions when I could. When I got to the point where I knew what I wanted to ask, they weren't around anymore. So there was a gap in my knowledge, but I do know that the postal agreement existed and people wrote from one side to the other.

At some point, my mother saw the light, as it were, and decided to escape.

>> Edna Friedberg: Let's back up a second though. The first year Warsaw is occupied.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right.

>> Edna Friedberg: Then in October 1940, the Germans established the ghetto. As we described it, it was around where you lived.

>> Sam Ponczak: Basically closed the wall, finished the wall around the ghetto. I think that months after they attacked the Jews were already being forced, Jews from the area surrounding Warsaw, were being forced into the area of the future ghetto, and they were all identified with an armband. You couldn't take off the armband under penalty of death. If you were found that you took off the armband and you were Jewish, there was no trial; you were shot on the spot.

So that was the situation. Of course, the Polish population that lived in the old ghetto part was forced to move out, and the Jewish population from the rest of Warsaw, as well as from around Warsaw, was forced to move in.

I personally think that the Germans at that time did not have a specific plan on how to liquidate all the Jews, but they did know that it would help if we keep them separate from the rest of the population and concentrated. Eventually, behind a wall. So that took care of itself in some ways, because maybe 100,000 of them starved to death or from illnesses. The majority were sent to their death in planned train cars, wagons, cars to Treblinka and other death camps, whose sole purpose was to kill. There was no work. There was no plan -- well, maybe I'm getting myself ahead.

>> Edna Friedberg: It's OK. You've described the conditions in the ghetto. Just to make sure that the audience understands, when we're talking about tens of thousands of people forced into this area, it's an area of just a few square miles. So extremely crowded. There is no good sanitation. Food shortages, disease. Really, a quite hellish place. Your mother was extraordinary to escape from the ghetto with her, her not quite 3-year-old son. Tell us about how she arranged that.

>> Sam Ponczak: I don't know exactly the details, but somehow she made it to the train station. She got into a wagon, and she told me that a priest had planted himself in front of her, told her to take off the armband. He stood in front of both of us, and whenever she says the police, there was a so-called blue police or the gendarmes going around checking the documents.

>> Edna Friedberg: Polish police?

>> Sam Ponczak: Yes, Polish police, but also German militant police. The priest was very smart. He was pointing to the back saying "Well, the woman with the kid is from my parish." Being that he was dressed as a priest, I guess that was good enough. So in hindsight, I don't know who the man was, but I'm sure he saved my life.

>> Edna Friedberg: Your mother then literally walked, right, walked from German territory?

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, I don't know exactly how she made it. The border between the Soviet occupied and the German occupied part was a river, the river Bug. She knew enough that this river used to freeze up in the winter, around the wintertime. Because she came from that area. So she probably knew.

Now, how she made it, where she stopped, who helped her, I don't know. But somehow she made it to the river. Probably with the help of some guides, but she decided that she will cross the river at night, not to be visible, and that's what exactly happened. I don't know the date, but she basically carried me and whatever else she could, and she started to walk at night on that ice.

I was a toddler, and of course, the poor woman was slipping and sliding. She was falling. I had a ball. I thought it was really funny. She was telling me later that I was laughing so loud that she was afraid that either the Germans or the Soviets will shoot us. Because it carries, I guess, on the river. So to shut me up, she found a bunch of pictures that she carried with her, and gave them to me to entertain. By the time we got to the Soviet side, all the pictures were torn up, so I stand before you guilty of destroying all my family's pictures from before the war. So you see stuff from during the war and after the war. Of course, my sister still cannot forgive me for that. But what can I tell you?

>> Edna Friedberg: I think when talking about history, sometimes it's easy to forget what it's like to be a parent and to be in this stressful situation, and that she just had a toddler she had to keep quiet.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right, right.

>> Edna Friedberg: Both humorous and terrifying story. Once she made this dangerous journey, she reunited with your father in Soviet territory, correct?

>> Sam Ponczak: I think I know that she was telling me that apparently, we were caught by the Soviet border patrol. She was telling me about dogs. So I assume we were caught. I don't know how long we were kept, but eventually we were reunited with my father. Now, these are still moments that I don't remember, but I do remember when we were sent to a place called Kolthaus, which was infamous in some ways. It was a gulag, those who know Russian history. The czars sent their enemies to gulags in Siberia.

>> Edna Friedberg: A prison camp.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. My earliest recollection, self-awareness, which was from that place, the gulag, it was essentially a labor camp. It was not just a Jewish labor camp. There were Poles, Jews, probably some other people.

The camp was in the middle of the Taiga, so it was guarded, but I don't remember any Russian or Soviet soldier with a machine gun or whatever standing over the people. But you couldn't escape anyhow, because there was nowhere to escape. It was Taiga, it was woods for hundreds of miles. It's

around a few hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle. So there was lots of woods and I remember being for some time living in a yurt, like an Indian teepee. A large teepee, but Mongolian style.

>> Edna Friedberg: A tent?

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. The locals, the Natives, were of Mongolian or Tartar extraction and spoke their Komi language. I suppose I started to understand Russian. My memories became more vivid and I remember the camp, I remember my father standing in the river up to his neck, pushing the logs of the trees that they just hand cut, with some other people. I think I do remember that the people looked very strange. They never smiled. They never smiled. They were strange. Many, many years later, 20, 30 years later, I asked my father, What was it about these people? Why do I remember them the way I described? He said, Well, these were people who were mostly immigrants, mostly Jews, Poles, and they were put to work at something very hard. They were tailors. Tailors work hard, but they don't have to cut big trees and get in the river, pushing them around. There were people who were doctors, accountants, you name it. They were just not used to that physical, hard work.

Of course, food was rationed. There were people who had so-called bad habits. They smoked. There was no tobacco. They couldn't go and buy cigarettes, so they smoked moss, for example. Those who liked to have a drink, there was no vodka or wine, certainly. But for some strange reason, they had cologne. Later on, I found out it does lots of things to the brain when you drink --

>> Edna Friedberg: Cologne like perfume?

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. There was a lot of dying and hunger and exhaustion, etc. That's the kind of expressions that I remember.

Then, sometime later, we were sent to another place called Syktyvkar, we were sent by a barge. I remember being a few days on some barge. And in the town we were given a place to live, and my father resumed his work as a tailor. My mother was a seamstress. They didn't know what to do with me, so I was hanging around with them in the factories for a while.

So I remember them sewing these winter jackets for the Soviet Army. I suppose it must have been end of 1941, because I'm guessing that was already the time when the war between the Germans and the Soviets started, in the summer of 1941.

>> Edna Friedberg: To clarify for a second. In the first place where you were, very remote, desolate, near the Arctic Circle, when describing the labor that your parents and others were doing, they were not paid for this, this was forced labor?

>> Sam Ponczak: No, they got paid by food. There was no payment. They were given the portion of -- there were cards and later on I remember they were cutting out, they got a piece of butter or some bread or meat or whatever. It was all rationed. They were rationing the cards.

I must point out, it was not just for these refugees. If I remember, I think the local population had made, more or less, the same thing. They were also poor. They also lived miserably. So there was no differences. Not much difference between the local natives who were not drafted, because most of the Soviet young people, women, men, were drafted to the war, to the Army, and those who remained were mostly older people.

>> Edna Friedberg: While you were in the Soviet Union, your mother became pregnant, did she not?

>> Sam Ponczak: Yes. Yes. That's a painful memory, because I do remember my twin brothers. Excuse me.

>> Edna Friedberg: It's OK. Take your time.

>> Sam Ponczak: I remember they were born, and then I remember they died. Maybe it was another few months. I don't know why. We never discussed it. But I remember.

>> Edna Friedberg: Sam, while you were in the Soviet Union under these harsh conditions, did you attend school at all?

>> Sam Ponczak: Yes, I did. I guess after a while I was sent to what was equivalent to maybe kindergarten in Komi, and the thing that is funny, because I didn't know what it was, I saw an elephant, a real, live elephant, in that Siberia, and I couldn't stop wondering.

Now, when you think about it, when the Russians were withdrawing from the German onslaught, they moved everything they could, including the animals in the zoo, and this animal found its way to Siberia. I do remember it.

I already started to become aware that there was a war. The way I became aware, because in that place there was a loudspeaker attached to a corner between the ceiling and the walls, and every day in a very, very serious voice some speaker was announcing that "Our brave soldiers have withdrawn in organized fashion from" such-and-such town. They didn't say retreated, they say withdrawn to another town. And that went on.

So somehow, you become aware this is a war going on, for a kid almost any situation, as long as they're not very hungry, is like a normal situation. That's how it is, you know. You make a toy, you play with it, and if it breaks you make another toy.

Then I remember, it must have been after 1942 and the famous battle of Stalingrad happening, because I remember the same voice announcing that "Today our glorious Army " Blah, blah, blah "Has conquered" or freed some town. So the war was going the right way.

>> Edna Friedberg: The glorious Army was the Soviet Army?

>> Sam Ponczak: Of course. The enemy was the German Army, of course.

>> Edna Friedberg: I will interrupt one more second to make sure the audience is with us. Sam mentioned that Germany and the Soviet Union had a pact, they were Allies. Then in June 1941, the Germans betrayed that pact and launched a surprise attack against the Soviet Union. So Sam and his family had been in friendly-to-German territory, now we're in territory that is enemies to Germany.

You're in Ukraine for several years then at this point, right?

>> Sam Ponczak: What happened was that the Soviet government was trying to persuade people like my father to assume Soviet citizenship or whatever. They chose not to do that, because they did not know what was going on in Poland. All that time, they were not aware. But they decided not to take this offer, and I think because of that the Soviet government sent us from Siberia to Ukraine, which was much closer to the Polish territory. It was warmer, of course, and there were many hundreds of thousands of people like us.

It's not relevant, but the Soviet government had a pact with the Polish government in exile, and they tried to form an Army to fight the Germans, but that's part of the history and I don't want to bore you with that.

>> Edna Friedberg: Sam, when you say that your parents were not aware of what was going on in Poland, explain what you mean. You mean the family? You mean the Holocaust?

>> Sam Ponczak: No, they were not aware, because there was nothing in the -- well, Poland in 1943 was not liberated yet. Liberation came in summer of 1944, for parts of Poland. Now, the Soviet press, to my knowledge, did not write much, because they didn't have correspondents or TV like today, on the front. So nothing was known, and there was nobody to write to and nobody to receive letters from.

So it was one big unknown that was hanging over their heads, but -- maybe I'll digress for a moment, because it just so happens that the person that I called a sister, who was not my blood sister, showed up with her son. This was the daughter of people who took in my father when he was a teenager and he was an apprentice. They lived in Warsaw. So he became almost like a son to them.

Unfortunately, when we all escaped, that family stayed. One day, basically, shipped to Treblinka to be killed. That girl was actually begged by her parents to jump off the train, which she did. She at the time was a teenager. She had 16 or 17 -- she was 16 or 17 years old. She jumped off the moving train, was wounded, etc.

To make a long story short, she survived, and she made it through the front area between the two armies, and she spent a year looking for us, because she somehow knew that we were somewhere in Russia. Lo and behold, she found us in Ukraine. When she showed up, my father said, That's your sister.

>> Edna Friedberg: You mentioned that your entire conscious life, aware life at this point, is in the chaos of war. Did you identify as Jewish? When did that awareness sink in and how?

>> Sam Ponczak: Yeah, I think -- well, I don't know. I cannot speak for American teenagers now, how they grow up. When I was growing up, I did not know that I was Jewish. I was just a kid. Worrying about playing stuff, food, elephants, what have you.

First time I -- actually, two events. In 1945, in the fall of 1945, the war has ended already. My father took me to a place, because we lived outside of the town, he took me to a place where there was a big room. I didn't know what it was. We went in, sat down, and there was a bunch of uniformed young men who were basically moving like that, like I'm showing you. I didn't know what it meant. I didn't know what it was. But the thing that struck me was that these men were crying. I didn't expect a uniformed man with their guns at their side crying. I just couldn't imagine that. But it stayed with me.

Many years when I already left Poland, I asked my father, Where was I? What was that place? So he explained to me that it was Yom Kippur, you know, the Jewish day of asking for forgiveness, and these were Jewish men, members of the Soviet Army, who had just returned from Europe, from Poland and Germany. He said they were crying because of what they saw. Of course, I understood.

So then, you know, the Jewish and the Holocaust became a little bit more familiar. The next event was a day when the three of us, my parents and I, went to a market. It was people were -- farmers were selling their products.

>> Edna Friedberg: Outdoor market?

>> Sam Ponczak: Outdoor market, right. We walked by a guy, a man, who was a paraplegic, had no legs, and he was sitting on a little platform with wheels and pushing himself. He turned to us, and basically yelling, saying, You Jews! How the heck, etc., used other expletives, did you survive? He called my father Jacob, because every Jew was a Jacob, and every female was a Sara. So he called them that. He said, How did you survive? Why didn't Hitler finish you off?

I couldn't understand that. So when I asked my father, he gave me a lecture about Judaism, what it meant, etc. So then, you know, being a Jew was not a very interesting situation, I suppose. But that, if you -- that's my basically awareness that, yeah, I was a Jewish kid. That's it.

>> Edna Friedberg: In May 1945, the war ends. When did your family return to Poland, and how?

>> Sam Ponczak: We returned in 1946, in February. It was a long, long journey. It took about three weeks to get from Ukraine to this place in Poland. In the meantime, I had a sister already at that time, who was born in 1945.

>> Edna Friedberg: How did you travel to Poland?

>> Sam Ponczak: We traveled in cattle cars, like packed -- I mean, it was not sealed like people who were traveling to their doom, but it was went, it was open, it was uncomfortable, etc., and we went through Poland.

Now, I did not see some of the greetings that some other trains saw, but apparently they were not friendly, they were not received friendly on the Polish side. But anyhow, we ended up going to what is now known as lower Silesia. I need to digress for a moment.

Many of you know probably about the pact between Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt, and these three people decided what is the -- what are going to be the new borders of Poland. They graciously ceded the eastern part of Germany, or some of the eastern part of Germany, to Poland, and they took the eastern part of Poland and gave it to Ukraine.

So the place we came was still had the German name, Reichenbach, Reichenberg or Reichenbach. I forgot. But anyhow, it was basically a town almost void of people. The only people there were elderly Germans, women and men, and -- Reichenbach. Yeah, that was Reichenbach. Rather not destroyed. It was a small, little German town.

At the same time, there were trains of people like us coming from Russia. In my case, we were from Warsaw, but Warsaw was destroyed. It was literally about 90-some percent leveled. There was nothing standing. We were automatically sent to an area that had apartments, streets, etc., and the same time there was a Polish population that lived in the eastern part of Poland, that now suddenly became Soviets. Many of my friends from there. They had to find -- and they who either survived there on place, in place, by hard-to-believe conditions, some hiding in a godforsaken hole somewhere or hiding in woods, or being hidden by Sol Polish people or even Ukranians. Those people could not find a place to live either, because of the complications with the what happens to the apartments, the shops of the Jews that were killed.

So all these people were going west, and ended up in the towns like this Reichenbach, which later became Dzierzoniow. It's hard to believe, but there were 25,000, 30,000 Jews in one place in this little town.

I should add too, that's the first time I understood, I didn't understand at the time, but I saw ethnic cleansing, because what happened was that the few Germans that remained were impolitely asked to move on, to get the heck out, move to Germany, wherever, eastern, western, because at that time all these things were not well-defined. Talking about 1946.

So I do remember these poor old people packing their belongings in these baby carriages, because that seemed like everyone had a baby carriage, with no babies, and they were going to the train station. Eventually, they appeared. The old lady, we were told this is your apartment, was gone after a few months. I don't know where. I don't know who she was. But we ended up, I ended up, discovering a real apartment, with a kitchen and a room and a bathroom, even though the bathroom was near the staircase, on the stairwell, but nevertheless it was not an outhouse.

So I was a very happy kid. I didn't know Polish, of course, because then Russian became my first language. And now I had to learn how to speak Polish. But anyhow, that's another story.

>> Edna Friedberg: Part of why it is confusing, it was a confusing time. There were people being moved out of where they had lived, people coming back who had been gone for years. Just for a sense of context, Sam's story is typical of many hundreds of thousands of people. We tend to think of the experience of Polish Jews as being in ghettos and concentration camps, very formal places, but of approximately 3 million Jewish people who lived in Poland before the war, about 250,000 survived by being in the Soviet Union. They were "lucky enough" to not be in German territory, and they came back to places where their neighbors were not necessarily glad to see them return.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right, right.

>> Edna Friedberg: We have a few more minutes. I want to ask you a couple more questions. Your parents returned, other Polish Jews returned, hoping to find their families, their extended families. Did your parents find any relatives alive?

>> Sam Ponczak: No. We didn't find any. Although, unknown to us, a cousin of mine, who still lives in New York, was alive but we did not know.

You need to understand that we were the lucky family. We were an intact family. There were two parents and children. That was a rarity in 1946 and 1947.

Typically, there was a single man, a single woman, and kids, there were not too many kids in this town.

But things I do remember, reminded me a little bit of 9/11 because you remember 9/11 happened, and suddenly on the walls of that area, whatever walls there were, suddenly you saw posters -- not posters, but signs "Has anybody seen my uncle?" I remember that in Poland in 1946. In the building where there was a Jewish committee, there were handwritten notes, in Yiddish, in Polish, any language, looking for members of family.

Now, being a unit family, my mother was very kind person, so she invited people to come for dinner or have a drink. At that time, I already started to understand Yiddish, because that's what my parents talked.

>> Edna Friedberg: The language of European Jews, East European Jews.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right, language that Jews use. I didn't have a choice, though I listened to what was happening around, with men sitting, sometimes crying, drinking vodka. But it invariably the topic was have you seen? What do you know of? Have you seen? Etc., etc.

One of the things that stays with me is the point that those who survive the concentration camps, of course, we didn't, we weren't in the concentration camps, but they were saying that these who were selected to die that day were marched to their death. And I -- there are lots of young people, I'm not going to go into it, but they were looking at those who were spared for that day, and they -- invariably that theme repeated itself, saying, Remember, telling what you've seen. Tell about it.

You know, it's like saying these are people, and they mentioned they knew where they were going. They were not surprised. Men, children, old, young, whatever.

So this business of remembering. Now, many, many years later, recently, say 10, 8, 7, 8 years ago, I was translating some material from Polish into English, and the topic was those people who were interested were in their 80s, some 90s, but they were youngsters in 1939. They were school kids, and Polish, not Jewish, and they were asked to tell what they saw looking from outside into these ghettos, even sometimes concentration camps.

I remember a few tapes where they described the group of boys sitting or hanging around on the side of road, watching how a column of Jews is being marched to their execution in some Jewish cemetery or in a forest. And it was the same thing these people were yelling out to the kids on the side road "Pray to Jesus! Pray to God! Tell everybody what happens to us! Tell everybody!"

You know, then when I saw these tapes, I remember the theme: Tell, tell. And then I realize where it came from. So that basically became my motivation for working here and being willing to talk about all that stuff and doing translation. I thank you.

>> Edna Friedberg: Thank you. We're coming soon to the close of our program. We do want to allow time for a few questions. If you have a question for Sam, I ask that you approach one of the microphones in the aisle. In the meantime, we'll start with a question if we have one from Twitter. I'll just read. What do you hope students get out of their visit to the museum? Douglas brown is asking.

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, I hope that they learn a piece of history, real history. This is what happened. I'm one of the lucky ones. I was -- our generation is going. And especially in the world where there is so much denial, so much incredulity and, you know, some people feel that they can manipulate and change it, modify it to serve their purposes. So my only hope that to some it will stay as a sad moment in history of mans inhumanity to others.

It's true. It's happened. And I do not mean to say that nothing good, we need to learn from that. Unfortunately, I see that not much is learned. But I have to admit I had a happy life. When I came here in 1964, I was standing on the plank of the SS United States, which was a flagship, and I felt that it was a coming home moment, like that America accepted me.

So, you know, there is good future in front of you guys, and girls. But it's good to know the reality. It's good to know history. It's important to know.

There's a philosopher in Israel, his name is Yehuda Bauer, and the guy is trying to modify the Ten Commandments. He adds the 11th commandment, I tell it to the young people, is do not allow yourself to be a victim. He has in mind probably bullying in that case, bullying, etc.

His 12th commandment is do not be a perpetrator. Don't be a bully. But he says the most important is the 13th: Do not be indifferent. When you see something that is bad, react. Don't turn away. I think that should be, in my mind, the most important lesson for the kids, and for everybody for that matter.

>> Edna Friedberg: Thank you. Thank you, Sam.

>> Sam Ponczak: Thank you.

[Applause]

>> Edna Friedberg: Don't get up yet. Do we have a question? Yeah, please, come. We have a few minutes.

>> My question was you talked about in the ghettos how people would get sick and stuff. Did anyone in your family get sick?

>> Sam Ponczak: I'm sorry, in the ghettos were organized in large cities and in small cities, in Poland and in Ukraine and Lithuania, in all these places that were conquered by the German Army. Am I answering the question?

>> Edna Friedberg: He wanted to know if anyone in your family was sick or died in ghettos, specifically in your family, if you know what happened to them?

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, I do not know for a fact, but there was a person who mentioned something to my father after the war. It turns out that the deal that was made between my father and my mother about let me go east and see what it is like, then I'll bring you over. OK?

In our case, it has a happy ending, because we were connected. In the case of my uncle, who was the father of my cousin that survived, apparently he went east, and because they were supposed to meet and they met, did meet, their paths crossed. So he returned apparently to Poland, and somebody mentioned that they saw him in the Warsaw ghetto.

>> Edna Friedberg: He was never seen again after that?

>> Sam Ponczak: Never seen. Most likely perished.

>> Edna Friedberg: Yes, these two, then we'll close.

>> I know you said that you realized there was a war going on around the country, but did you really realize the severity of the situation around Europe?

>> Sam Ponczak: No, I did not. I don't think that a kid has interest or capacity to understand the world problem or Europe's problem. They're concerned with the immediate surrounding. There's a father, mother, other sibling or somebody to play with, that's your world, no matter how unhappy they may be, as long as they're not very angry.

Is that my understanding of what goes on in the mind of a small child, right? I don't think there is a child that is so smart, there may be, that knows about geopolitics and what was going on in Poland or in Holland or in Russia.

>> Edna Friedberg: There was less access to information also.

>> Sam Ponczak: Of course.

>> Edna Friedberg: Even for adults.

>> Sam Ponczak: The parents didn't know what was going on.

>> Edna Friedberg: OK, yes? Last question.

>> Mine is more of a point of clarification. In the pamphlet it speaks of your sister that was born in Ukraine. Is this the sister that was Belarusian and came and the father said this is your sister?

>> Sam Ponczak: No, two separate people. But because this was -- when she came to us, the war was about over. Well, within a few months. We probably knew from her what was going in her life, and she saw a lot of atrocities. She was older. She's at least 12 or 15 years older than I am. But my father realized from what -- she described the train to Treblinka and she was literally pushed off to survive. So that my father realized this was an orphan, presumed she's an orphan. He said she's my sister. That's how strong he felt. We were all together. She married from my house. She just passed away a few weeks ago.

>> Edna Friedberg: It then there was a new baby born.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right.

>> Edna Friedberg: We're just about out of time. It is our tradition here at First Person that our first person guest has the last word. I have a favor to ask. After Sam's closing thoughts, we'd like to take a portrait of him with all of you behind standing. When he is finished, if you can please stand in place, we would really appreciate it.

Sam, any closing thoughts?

>> Sam Ponczak: No, I thank everybody for coming and willing to listen to my story. I hope you draw conclusions that you draw. I hope it's not indifference, because I believe strongly if you can get involved, get involved.

Do something good. Thank you.

[Applause]