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. We are in our 17th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Estelle Laughlin, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 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 are grateful for their sponsorship.

First Person is a series of 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 serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue twice-weekly through mid-August. The museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

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

Estelle will share with us her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If 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, also 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 when Estelle came to 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 who were discovered and forced out of hiding. We see here an historical photograph of German soldiers

leading Jews captured during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising to the assembly point for deportation in May 1943.

After they were discovered, Estelle and her family were deported to the Majdanek extermination camp where Estelle's father was killed. The location of Majdanek is highlighted on this map of extermination camps in Poland. Estelle, her mother and sister endured labor in two more camps before eventually being liberated by the Russians.

Estelle, her mother and sister emigrated to the United States in 1947 on the Marine Flasher. We close with Estelle's immigration certificate which was issued in July of 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 has his own business. Between them, they have given Estelle seven grandchildren, one for each day of the week, as she notes. Estelle's husband died in 2008. She moved five 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 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 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 "Stateless." 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, Estelle Laughlin.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person. Today we have just a short hour and you have so much to share with us, so we'll start right away.

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

>> Estelle Laughlin: I was born in Warsaw, Poland to a middle class family. Warsaw was the center of my universe, in my selective memory in golden radiance of lilac trees against open blue skies, rich sounds of good neighbors, kindness and trust and love. Magic train rides through the country with family became shelters in my memory. As a matter of fact, when I lost everything, these memories became my possessions.

>> Bill Benson: You said to me "When I think of that time, I think of loving neighbors, trains to the countryside, time with family and friends. Everything was bright and wonderful." That was your life in those days.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little bit about your father. From what I've read about him in your book and what you've told me, he was a remarkable man.

>> Estelle Laughlin: My father was my [Indiscernible]. He was a wonderful man. He taught me the values that helped me survive with a lot of suffering with love and compassion and love for humanity and joy for life. Life should be lived joyfully.

>> Bill Benson: And your mother, she had fled from violence and anti-Semitism in Russia. Just say a little bit about her, too.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, unfortunately the Jewish history is very complicated. While the Holocaust is the most horrendous -- I don't mean to compare but there were inquisitions, persecutions of Jews. And my mother was born in a shtetle in Belarus, in Russia. And she was chased out by the Cossacks and then she came to Poland, to Warsaw, married a man that she was very much in love with, was very proud of her two children. And the second war, she was persecuted again. And I hope never, ever again.
>> Bill Benson: Germany invades Poland, beginning World War II. They attacked Warsaw that very day. What do you remember of that day and then of the siege of Warsaw?
>> Estelle Laughlin: Immediately my life changed beyond recognition. Actually, it started out September 1. And suddenly we heard this tremendous explosion and then such silence as though all the air was sucked out of the universe. And then the sirens and we heard on the radio that Poland was attacked, that bombs were dropped on Warsaw without declaring war. At that moment I stopped being a care-free child and took on the heavy burdens of suffering and war.
>> Bill Benson: Warsaw held out for a month following the German invasion of Poland. You wrote that the German Army marched into Warsaw on October 1, 1939, and that immediately "My life changed beyond imagination." Tell us about those changes once the Germans occupied Warsaw.
>> Estelle Laughlin: They came to the homes, streets, cut off electricity, rationed all food, made books illegal, they closed schools. They then very soon isolated us in a small ghetto. They built a thick wall around us. They filled the ghetto with droves of Jewish people driven out from surrounding areas. There was not enough food. There was not enough clothing. People were dying of starvation and cold and illness. They covered the bodies of children with posters saying "Children are the holiest things. Our children must live."

And yet, in this inferno, people gathered all the courage that was really in us and fought so heroically. Originally there was a moral resistance. Immediately the Jewish community in the ghetto organized itself in a self-aid center. Everybody who had a little bit more than their neighbors helped. There was not a child in our building. Warsaw was an ancient city. And most people lived in apartment buildings. There was not a child in our building over the age of 10 who did not in some way contribute. Every building had a kitchen for the starving neighbors. So we would stir the pots to help in the kitchen or peel potatoes or we would collect clothing. We put on fabulous shows for neighbors and collected money for the more needy ones.
>> Bill Benson: Estelle, when you were forced to move into the ghetto along with several hundred thousand other Jews, in a compact area, a wall built around the ghetto, describe a little bit about that and what it looked like.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, there were 400,000 people living in an area approximately 1.3 miles. So the congestion was enormous. In some buildings, 11, 12, 15, sometimes even more people lived in one room. There was squalor. There was poverty. There was children with bare feet on their knees begging, many orphans. The squalor was terrible.

You know, I said that -- it's very important for me to share the heroism of the people in the ghetto. Sometimes people ask me why didn't you fight back, why didn't the people in the ghetto fight back. But they did fight back. So very, very bravely. To own a book was an act of defiance, capital punishment, punishable by death; yet all over the ghetto there were secret libraries. My father had a secret stash of books by Yiddish writers, Shalom Aleichem, Shalom Asch, Isaac, at night with covers to keep our existent secret in a small room illuminated by a flickering lantern. My father would pull out his books and read to us. Our room felt like a capsule of paradise separating us from the silence, curfew silence, outside our windows.

You know, all over schools were folded yet all over the ghetto there were brave, unemployed teachers who risked their lives and met with children in small rooms and taught them to hold on to their imagination and faith and love.

We even had theaters. Imagine theaters when there was no bread. There was a very wonderful and remarkable historian in the ghetto whose name was Chaim Kaplan. And he said that it is astounding that at a time when we don't seem to need it at all, we need poetry more than we need

bread. And it is true. The soul needs to be nourished as much as the body does. I think our ability, our creative ability, our ability to think for ourselves is our Godliness and this was our way of holding on to our culture, to our Godliness, to our humanity.

So these were some of the examples of the squalor, of the persecution, of the indignities, and the way that we held on to our dignity. And I feel that this is reflective of all of us; that goodness and love for beauty and love for humanity is part of us.

>> Bill Benson: You wrote in your book that children followed adult examples to resist barbaric laws. "In our apartment complex there was no child over 10 who did not have some public duty." Just say a bit about that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. In my book I described how we put on the secret plays. You know, we children had to hide our books under our clothes to go to our secret classes. Well, that took a lot of courage. As a child, I don't think that I ever stopped and gave myself credit for the courage it took but now I see that it did take such courage. And children are very wise. In the process of writing my book, seeing the child that I was through the eyes of an old woman that I am now I saw the wisdom of children. I saw how children know right from wrong and how they make choices and good choices.

And for the children in the audience here, I feel self-conscious about sharing some of the cruelties that I will be sharing but I want to reassure you that if you hold on to that which is best in you, you will always be all right.

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, the Nazis started deporting large numbers of Jews out of Warsaw to death and concentration camps in 1942. For a substantial period of time, your family was able to avoid being deported. How did your parents manage to keep you from being taken by the Nazis? How were you able to survive during that time?

>> Estelle Laughlin: In July of 1942, the month of my 13th birthday, things became even more gruesome. This was the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. We didn't have the faintest idea that the deportation meant death. Some Jewish people were forced to write false letters to families inviting them to go to different towns where they were sheltered and fed and clothed. So you can imagine that the famished people, the homeless people, that many people marched unwillingly -- I mean unknowingly and willingly to Umschlagplatz, a deportation station and loaded on to freight trains and disappeared from our existence.

My family -- not everyone marched. Many people, I don't know if most but many people, hid. Now, where does one hide in an apartment building? Pretty much where I played with my grandchildren in hide and go seek, between -- behind couches, behind chairs, under beds. We hid between mattresses and box springs. Any corner we could find, hoping that we would not be found.

My family hid in a room. They obscured the door with a wardrobe. So while we were hiding, people were marched out of our life. We never heard from the people who were taken away from us but some people, somehow, managed to either hide under corpses or in some way avoid, at that point, being destroyed. And they came back to the ghetto and they told us about these horrendous train rides to a place called Treblinka, where our people were gassed.

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, at some point the Nazis decreed that all children under the age of 14 were useless to them. You were 13 at the time.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: What did that mean for you?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, children under 14 were contraband and I was 13. I was petrified that I will be -- my biggest fear was to be separated from my family. That was very strange to me. I couldn't quite understand it. But I had one important wish, that if I make my transition to death, that I hold on to the hands of my parents. So I was very frightened of being separated from them. I had braids, so my mother cut my braids, put my hair up, and dressed me in more adult clothes.

>> Bill Benson: To make you look older.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Just to make me look older. And I asked my father -- I said to him, "What will you do if they come and get me?" And he said, [Indiscernible]. I believed him; that I was loved, that I was safe, if only in his love.

>> Bill Benson: By November of 1942, 3/4 of Warsaw's Jews had been deported and killed. You and your sister, Fredka, were two of the 1% of children that were left in the Warsaw Ghetto. Almost devoid of children.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. We were among the 1% of children. Can you imagine a world without the sounds of children, without the presence of grandmothers and grandfathers? Because children and old people were the first ones to be deported. It was such silence. There was such, such dread. There was such emptiness.

I remember when I would walk up to the window or walk up to the gate of our building and stick my head out hoping that I would hear a sound of life and only silence called to me. It was so palpable.

It's amazing what human beings can endure and remain human. It is really one of the reasons why I share my story. And I'm sure this is one of the reasons why you are all here, to be reminded that human beings are capable of great evil and then recognize the importance of love and harmony and dignity of every individual.
>> Bill Benson: At the start of 1943, you went to work in a factory, a German factory. Tell us about that.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, before that -- oh, right. All the Jewish people -- there was only a handful of people who remained towards the end of the liquidation of the ghetto. Very few thousand Jewish people out of the 400,000 were still alive. Only the people who were useful to the Nazis had a right to exist. They were like demagogues. They decided who was to live and who was not to live. So there was just a small group of people who were permitted to live provided they were not old, provided they were not children, and provided that they were useful. Therefore, to prove their usefulness, if they could find employment in three factories, three German factories, that were stationed in that small sub ghetto. So everyone -- to get permission to work in that factory was a license to live.
>> Bill Benson: And in truth, you were a little girl now working in a factory.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. Right. Right.
>> Bill Benson: But having to pretend that you were older.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Oh, absolutely.
>> Bill Benson: And you would continue doing that not too terribly long because you were there during the remarkable Warsaw uprising and then the horrific obliteration of the ghetto. Tell us what happened during the uprising with you and your family particularly.
>> Estelle Laughlin: So I shared with you that some people managed to come to the ghetto and tell us about the horrific train rides and about Treblinka. When the remainder of the Jewish people, the small group of people, became aware of Treblinka, they began to organize themselves into armed resistance. My father was a member of the armed resistance, too.

They started to build bunkers in the basements, a network of bunkers. They dug tunnels so that they could navigate between the bunkers and also a tunnel under the wall to be able to get to the Christian side and get from the Polish underground some ammunition to fight with. Unfortunately not all the ammunition was delivered and not all the instructions were delivered either, so you can imagine these were warriors so needy of instruction and they didn't quite get it. So we had the bunker.

Events erupted with Germans entering the small ghetto. They entered with tanks and armored cars and lots of planes. There was a big announcement, humungous loudspeakers, saying that everyone better report for resettlement. Of course we knew what resettlement meant: or they will destroy everyone. And when we heard that, we had the bunker.

We used to live on the second floor but we moved to the ground floor, a five-story building with four blocks. We were the only family. So there was no issue. It was easy to find an apartment on the ground floor. When we heard that we better report immediately, we had the bunker and a secret trap door in the powder room floor, the commode lifted. We pulled the trap door down. I stepped down into the damp, dank underworld which was to be my world for who knows how long. The ceiling pressed down on me. The damp walls closed in on me. The flickering of the light was the substitute for the sun. The clicking of the clock was our only clue when morning was rising and when sun was setting.

The few people who were in the dunker with me were my whole nation. How I longed for the open horizon or the blue crispness of day.

Should I proceed?

>> Bill Benson: Mm-hmm.

>> Estelle Laughlin: While we were in the bunker, the fighters -- fighting broke out in the streets. Facing 20th Century, armed from head to toe, facing armored cars, facing flocks -- the sky was black with airplanes, bombs dropping all around us. It was a small band of freedom fighters poorly clad, poorly fed, poorly armed. They climbed up on rooftops. They stepped in front of windows, opened the windows. They dashed out. Sewers were also a very essential way of communication without being seen. They dashed out from the tunnels, from the sewers, and they lobbed Molotov cocktails, hand grenades, and whatever ammunition they had.

You know, it is really noteworthy that it took this handful of band of fighters longer to fight than it took for Poland and France to capitulate.

>> Bill Benson: For one full month they held out.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: How were you discovered?

>> Estelle Laughlin: At some point a grenade was thrown into our bunker. We had no corner to hide anymore. They dragged us out in the street. We did not march like a swarm of nameless people. We were people with names, with love.

Sometimes children asked me how did you feel and I tell them I felt just like you feel inside. They asked me did you feel inside. I tell them I feel -- I felt just like they feel inside. I, too, wanted to catch a ball soaring in the air; I, too, wanted to feel grass under my bare feet; I, too, wanted to take my family, my parents and friends for granted. The only difference, the big difference, was that I couldn't do it and the children then couldn't do it and my grandchildren and children today can do it. And that's the way it should be.

So they dragged us through the burning ghetto. Flames, enormous flames, were licking the sky and painting it an outer worldly colors of iridescence. Plumes of smoke. Our lips were chapped. They marched us to Umschlagplatz and loaded us on the freight train.

In the morning we woke up, we arrived in Majdanek, an extermination camp.

>> Bill Benson: And I know that there aren't the words to describe it adequately here but tell us about Majdanek, which you went to with your parents and your sister and you would lose your father there.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Majdanek was surrounded by an electrified barbed wire fence. There were columns -- towers where the guards watched us. Every step we went with beams of light. In the center of the camp was a gallow from which the gibbets, our friends were dangling. I don't know why they needed to scare us more and punish us so much more. Within sight there was the gas chamber with the chimney. We worked. It was completely useless. We dug up dirt from one place and replaced it and planted it in another place.

You know, even in Majdanek, indescribable inferno, we still composed songs and poetry. Of course, women -- there were no children. There were no old people. Men were separated. Actually, we knew that our existence there was only for one purpose. We were waiting to be gassed, which leads probably to the next question if I may jump.

>> Bill Benson: Please.

>> Estelle Laughlin: How we --

>> Bill Benson: First, when did you know -- when did you last see your father?

>> Estelle Laughlin: The last time I saw my father was when we were separated. My father was sitting with a group of men. I was sitting with a group of women. The children -- there were just a few children that we kept in hiding in the ghetto, not to be seen. And they were dragged out. They were in this little place that looked like a stable.

My father was sitting with the men. He was sitting in front. He was very sick. He had TB. His blood was crimson. He sat in front of the road. Looked so sad. I was so used to looking into my father's eyes for reassurance, for steadiness, for love, and there he was looking so miserable. When the guards

walked passed us, I dashed in front of him. I kneeled down and I said, "Tata, don't worry, they won't get me." I turned the lapel of my coat -- we had cyanide sewn into our lapel. I said, "Tata, they will never get me. Remember, I have cyanide." My father looked up to me and he said, "No, darling. You must live."
>> Bill Benson: You had a photograph of your father that you lost.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Mm-hmm.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us how it was taken from you.
>> Estelle Laughlin: When we arrived in Majdanek and I was already separated from my father, was with my mother and sister. My sister was a year and a half older, was also 14 years old. We were marched, sure that we were marched to the showers. And we knew what the showers meant. Now, I still had my clothes on. I had one treasure that I hid under the lining of my shoe. That was my father's photograph. A German soldier stopped me and he said, "What do you have hidden?" He probably once hoped I had maybe some gold or some jewelry hidden. And I assured him, I said, "I have absolutely nothing." He said, "Yes, you do." So quickly was thinking that the photograph -- if he finds me -- I didn't want to lie. So I thought if I show him the photograph, it's so useless to him. I said, "I have one thing hidden." And I pulled out the photograph. And I said, "This is my father. Can I have it?" And he snatched it away. And that was the last possession that I had. Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: Estelle, now it's you, your sister and your mother. In the time we have left, you would be at Majdanek for a while, then move to several other camps. I know it's very hard to compress it but tell us what happened to the three of you from there.
>> Estelle Laughlin: I'm going to have to abbreviate very much. My mother and sister and I had a pact that if one of us would be sent to the gas chamber, all three of us would go.

My mother, by the way, was the only mother in the entire camp. All the other mothers were killed, to the best of my knowledge. We were the only family of three to the best my knowledge that lived in that camp. So everyone else practically was alone. So we considered ourselves to be very fortunate.

My sister was beaten very, very severely. And the following day when we were to report for work, she was not able to stand up. I describe in my book the circumstances. So we hid her under the bunks. When my mother and I came back from work, my sister ran up to us and she said -- this is the end. My sister felt so indignant about the humiliating conditions of our existence. For instance, we didn't even have bathrooms in Majdanek. There was one ditch at the edge of the barbed wires that was an open pit. And the humiliation to go to the bathroom with the guards standing guard above. My sister said, "If they want to kill us, let them kill us." So she said -- she just said I don't want to live with some humiliation.

While we were away and she was hidden, some German soldiers came to the camp and anyone they found they put on the list. So they put my sister on the list. The assumption was beyond any shadow of a doubt that that meant that she's going to go -- that she was on the list to go to the gas chamber. So the only logical thing to do was for my mother and me to trade places with other two women who were on the list.
>> Bill Benson: To go to gas chamber with her.
>> Estelle Laughlin: So that we go to the gas chamber along. These two other women traded places with the hope to see another sunrise. Well, the following morning when they were calling out the names and they called out my sister's name and the names of these two people that we, my mother and I, took their names. So we reported. They put us on a train and we were sent to Skarzysko, which was a slave labor camp. There is a slight difference between extermination camp and slave labor camp. An extermination camp was a factory, a modern, humungous factory of killing people. A slave labor camp was a place where you worked practically to death. And Skarzysko and then later Czestochowa. We worked in an ammunition factory.
>> Bill Benson: I'm going to ask you -- there's so many things that we don't have time for you to tell. The fact that you and your mother got on the list thinking you were going to go to your death and that

ended up saving your life there. Shortly after on your way to Skarzysko on the train, the train stopped and, again, your lives were saved there. Tell us about that.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, you know, survival was mostly random luck. 99% was random luck and maybe .5% was feistiness. But without the .5% of feistiness you were 100% dead.

When we were on the train, there was one pit stop. My sister had to go to the bathroom. We pleaded with her not to go. She said, "But I have to." So we were like one organism. Wherever we went, we went together so that if we live together or die together. So my mother and sister -- I and my mother followed my sister. Then the guns started to pop. They chased us on to the train. Instead of going into the same train that we were, we boarded another wagon.
>> Bill Benson: By mistake.
>> Estelle Laughlin: We were just running from the bullets flying around. The fortunate thing was that that train, that wagon, was unloaded. In Skarzysko there were three branches of ammunition factories. And one branch was where they were working on gunpowder without any masks and for the whole day. And the people just turned, within a couple of months, absolutely yellow, the color of the gunpowder. Their lungs, they just suffocated to death so that coincidence saved our lives.
>> Bill Benson: It's such an understatement from reading your book and having the opportunity to listen to you on a couple of occasion that your mother was just a remarkable woman. Tell us about the incident at Skarzysko where your mother confronted a really brutal guard, if you don't mind.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. Well, we hardly ever saw daylight. You know, in this museum, there is the glass dome. It's interesting, the architect, the reason why he made the glass dome was because when he interviewed survivors, they were so aware of the sky -- which reminds me -- I'm sorry for digressing but we marched every day, of course, to work and back to our barracks. And the one thing while we were marching that I was aware of was the patch of sky. So once we were marching like this, one kapo started to beat another one of the people, one of the Jewish people. Of course, there were always dogs. To this day I am afraid of dogs. And my mother stood up, the other woman, stepped out of the marching of the slave labor people and she said "Blood and my grave will follow you for what you're doing to our people." So my sister and I were so afraid that they will shoot us on the spot but they didn't.
>> Bill Benson: I think it was at Skarzysko that you and your sister and mother were referred to as the three monkeys.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. Endearing.
>> Bill Benson: It was the original title of your book, an affectionate term. Why did they call you that?
>> Estelle Laughlin: We were so close. We didn't take the instant for granted that we had one another. And, of course, we were all covered with lice and mange. And the lice itched and you scratched. There was no medicine, just scabs oozing. So we would just sit close together and pick lice, like monkeys. So our friends, the people, would call us the three monkeys in an affectionate way.
>> Bill Benson: In the summer of 1944, you were forced to move again, taken by train to yet another champ called Czestochowa. That's where you would eventually be liberated from. Tell us a little bit about Czestochowa and then your liberation.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, Czestochowa was essentially like Skarzysko. It was also an ammunitions factory. We were so isolated. It was impossible -- we might as well have been on a different planet. It was impossible to imagine that only a few rabbit hops away from us people were sailing on silver lakes and children were sitting around tables and having meals as children should. We had no idea if the allies were winning or losing. Here one night we're lying on our bare planks and we hear a rumble of planes. And we say, "Could it be?" After all of these years? Now, don't forget, this was from September 1939 to January 1945. And then bombs start dropping. It was like from heaven, to die by an allied bomb would be such a dignified death. We were pleading, God, don't let them stop bombing. We were liberated the following day.

In my book I describe what liberation was like. I assure you, it was not at all like anything you are likely to imagine. Very little has been written about liberation. It was January. Poland is cold.
>> Bill Benson: And that was an especially awful winter.

>> Estelle Laughlin: 1945. It was very cold. All we wore was -- no underwear, no stockings, no sweaters, just wooden clogs. So I describe how the gate opened, how we shuffled out, how we saw the Russian soldiers, how we ran up to them saying, oh, like messiah was here. And they put up their hands and said, “Sorry. We have a war to fight.” And, indeed, they had. The war didn't end until May of that year. They gave us a slab of bread and they said be sure that you find shelter before nightfall. Curfew was still war. So we shuffled through, starving.

Our first meal -- some other people from the camp that met us told us down the street there was a pickle factory and there were windows broken so we climbed through the windows and our first meal was a dill pickle.

>> [Laughter]

>> Estelle Laughlin: I was very grateful for it. Dug potatoes from the frozen ground. Must have eaten them raw. Amazing how much human beings can endure and remain human and remain compassionate. And suffering does not have to drive you to despair and hate. It can teach you to love more deeply.

>> Bill Benson: We're almost out of time. And of course --

>> Estelle Laughlin: And I'd like to give some time for questions.

>> Bill Benson: I think we're going to have time for one or two, unfortunately. But there's so much more I wish Estelle could share with us. Next time maybe we'll schedule her for four hours.

>> Estelle Laughlin: You can do that.

>> [Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: We have time for a couple of quick questions. If you could go to the mic if you have a question. We ask that you make your question as brief as you can. I'll repeat it to be sure everybody hears it. And then Estelle will respond to your question. If not, I will ask a couple more.

>> Estelle Laughlin: The questions I miss answering, you can read in my book. I'll be signing.

>> Bill Benson: Yes. Absolutely. And Estelle will close our program in a few minutes. It's our tradition that our First Person has the last word so I'll turn to Estelle to close it. Once she's finished two things as first question is coming to the microphone. Two things, when Estelle is done, our photographer, Miriam, is going to come up on the stage and take a photograph of Estelle with you as the background. So I'm going to ask you all to stand so that we can do that. And then we're going to try to get Estelle off the stage and up there quickly so that she can sign copies of "Transcending Darkness" when we're done.

Let's go ahead. We have two people brave enough to ask questions.

>> Hi, Estelle. Thank you for being here today and presenting us with the story, first of all. My question that I've had for a long time is: What did you think of when you were first told that Jewish children weren't allowed to be played with, couldn't go to school, you know, couldn't shop in other stores and other people couldn't shop in the Jewish stores? What did you think of the Jewish -- or the German people at that time?

>> Bill Benson: What did you think of the Germans when you were being told of all the things that you couldn't do as a child?

>> Estelle Laughlin: What was I thinking? It was incredible. I had this impulse to walk up to a soldier and soldiers and say: Don't you have a mother and a father and children? How can you do it? Some part in me believed that there was humanity in their hearts. I still have to believe that it must be somewhere. It must have been. It was incredible. I could not understand. If you cannot trust adults -- these were adults. I was a child. If a child cannot trust adults, who can you trust? It was very fright anything. -- frightening.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you. We have a young man here with a question.

>> Yes, I have a question. When you were liberated, who were you liberated by, the Americans or the Russians?

>> Bill Benson: Were you liberated by the Americans or the Russians?

>> Estelle Laughlin: I was liberated by the Russian forces.

>> Ok. Thank you.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Thank you for your question.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you. I think we have one more here.
>> [Question Inaudible]
>> Bill Benson: The question was, was your family a religious family? And how much role did faith play in your life during that time?
>> Estelle Laughlin: My family was not a religious family. I'm not a religious person. But I consider myself a very spiritual person. I feel connected with everything and -- that is living. I feel very much part of everything that is living. And my family was very humanistic, very concerned about kindness about charity, about human dignity.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you very much.

I'm going to turn to Estelle to close our program. I think where we left off, unfortunately, there's so much more to tell us with liberation and in early 1945 the war would continue, a time of chaos and yet Estelle, her sister and mother went through unbelievable things after that only to finally, two years later, more than two years later, make it to the United States in 1947.

Estelle?

>> Estelle Laughlin: I want to thank you all very much for being in the museum here and for listening. Seldom are people willing to listen or speak of such experiences because it generates such pain; yet we have to be reminded from time to time what can happen us and to civilization. When we accommodate ourselves to tyranny, what it does to the conscience of a nation, what it does to love, and what it does to trust.

Your being here gives me faith. My mother, in front of the crematorium, said "The world has a conscience. You will see if we survive that the German children will be asking their parents how could it have happened. Where was your conscience? And you know? She was right. German people are now asking how could it have happened in our country. And I feel that we are all left with the legacy to understand that human beings are capable of cruelties and to understand the importance of love, the importance of human dignity, everyone's dignity.

Thank you, again, so very much.

>> [Applause]