

REALTIME FILE

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS  
FIRST PERSON SAM PONCZAK  
MAY 17, 2018

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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*. We are in our 19th year of the *First Person* program. Thank you for joining us. Our First Person today is Mr. Sam Ponczak, whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2018 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 twice-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 serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue through mid-August. The museum's website, at [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org), provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Sam will share with us his "First Person" account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Sam a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our online conversation: *Never Stop Asking Why*. The conversation aims to inspire individuals and new generations to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises, and what

this history means for societies today. To join the *Never Stop Asking Why* conversation, you can ask your question and tag the museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and the hashtag #AskWhy. You can find the hashtag on the back of your program, as well.

A recording of this program will be made available on the museum's YouTube page. Please visit the First Person website, listed on the back of your program, for more details.

What you are about to hear from Sam is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction.

We begin with this portrait of Sam Ponczak and his sister Gisele taken in 1946.

Sam was born in 1937 in Warsaw, the capital of Poland. Warsaw is indicated on this map of Poland.

Sam's father, Jacob, was a tailor and his mother, Sara, was a seamstress. Here we see Sam's mother and father in portraits taken in 1940.

Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, starting World War II. When war broke out Sam's father escaped to the Soviet Union while Sam and Sara 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 that all Jewish residents move into the ghetto. The building where Sam and his family already lived was in the middle of the ghetto. In November of 1940 Sam's mother decided to escape the ghetto with Sam. In this photo we see a section of the wall that separated the rest of the city from the ghetto.

Eventually Sam and his mother were able to reunite with his father. They were soon sent to a labor camp in Siberia, then to a town called Syktyvkar in the autonomous region of Komi.

Finally in 1944, they were sent to the town of Kherson in the Ukraine, where Sam's sister Gisele was born. The family remained in Kherson for the remainder of the war. This portrait of the family was taken in 1946, after the family returned to Poland.

Sam completed high school in Wroclaw, Poland. In 1957 the family left Poland for France, then Argentina, and ultimately the United States, where they settled in 1964. Following Sam and his family's arrival in the United States, Sam enrolled in the University of Maryland at College Park. He soon met a "wonderful girl," as he said to me, and married Frieda in 1965. She was also a Holocaust survivor.

In 1967 Sam earned his Electrical Engineering degree and they moved to New Jersey where Sam went to work for RCA. While in New Jersey, Sam earned an MBA and an M.A. in Electrical Engineering from Rutgers. Their daughter Raquel was born, followed by their sons Joe and Brian.

In 1980, the family moved to Columbia, Maryland, when Sam went to work for Westinghouse. Frieda became ill in 1994 and died in 1996. Sam retired in 2009 at age 72 from Northrup Grumman, which had previously acquired Westinghouse. Before retiring, Sam thought a lot about how he would spend his retirement years and knew he wanted to devote himself to work concerning the Holocaust.

He became active in the museum and is a volunteer translator of recorded and written Holocaust-related material. Sam speaks Polish, Russian, French, Spanish, Yiddish and, of course, English. He also endowed a charitable fund in Baltimore that rewards teachers and schools that teach in a "World Class" way about the Holocaust. The awardees are

recognized each year on Yom HaShoah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day, which this year was April 11th. The Ponczak-Greenblatt Endowment is named for Sam and Freida's parents and for Freida. Several years ago, Sam became involved in Polish-Jewish relations in Poland, which takes him to Poland periodically. Maybe toward the end of the program we might hear more about some of Sam's work in that regard.

Sam lives in Arlington, Virginia, just outside of Washington, D.C. His three children all live in the area. He has eight grandchildren. I'm happy to let you know that Sam's daughter Raquel and her daughter Felicia are here today with him.

With that, I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Sam Ponczak.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Sam, thank you for your willingness to be our First Person today and be here. You have so much to share with us in just such a short time, less than an hour so we'll start and I'll get right into my first questions.

The war began, of course, with the invasion of Poland in September 1939 when you were not yet 2 years old. Before we turn to the war years and the Holocaust and what it meant for you and your family, tell us a bit, before we begin with the rest of the story, about your family and your community before the war began. Tell us about your parents' lives in those days.

>> Sam Ponczak: My parents come from small towns in eastern Poland. At a young age, I think about 12 or 13 years old, they had to leave school for reasons of they needed to work to bring some money into the family. They made the decision to move -- they didn't know each other then, of course. They were from two different towns. But each one of them moved to Warsaw. And my father at that tender age was actually taken care of by friends of his parents who happened to live in Warsaw and similar story with my mother.

So they basically learned the trade of tailor or seamstress independently in Warsaw for many years. They didn't have much education. I think four or five grades of primary school. And that was the life of the typical poor Jewish family who was the typical family in Poland before the war. So they lived in the area, what became the Warsaw Ghetto. And that's where they got married and I was born there. That's when war found them in 1939.

>> Bill Benson: Before we turn to that, Sam, a couple more questions. Your father was a labor organizer on top of his profession as a tailor. Right?

>> Sam Ponczak: True. True. He was active in the trade unions. He was rather leftist, liberal leftist. And he was an avid reader of leftist propaganda. And that's probably what steered them to make a decision in 1939 -- I was trying to imagine a 29-year-old fellow with a 28-year-old wife and a 2-year-old kid and suddenly the bombs are falling on the city where you live and you need to make a decision what to do. It's not a trivial decision. The German Air Force was bombing Warsaw for almost a month. There were 20,000 people killed in that time. You had to make a decision what to do. You had to run. You need to decide where.

>> Bill Benson: And your father made a momentous decision to leave.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. Well, at the time when all of this was happening -- actually, Germany attacked from the west and the Soviet Union attacked from the east. So on September 17, Poland ceased to exist. The government of Poland disappeared on September 3. They found their way to London. And there was nobody in charge.

So you can imagine a city that was defenseless, was being burned and strafed. People had to make decisions so the decision of my parents was that my father will try to escape to the Soviet-occupied part, figure out maybe if it's safer there, and then they somehow

will connect. And that was the decision.

>> Bill Benson: Why do you suppose the decision was for your father to go but your mother to remain behind with you?

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, my mother stayed because she had family. She had three brothers, parents in Warsaw. It was easier for my father as a single man, I suppose, to go through the borders, smuggle himself in. It was not a separation. It was let me see, see if it's better there or not. There were actually people who after say let me see returned to Warsaw. That was a very fatal decision on their part but there were people like that.

>> Bill Benson: Once your father was in Russia, do you know if your parents had any way to remain in touch with each other?

>> Sam Ponczak: Apparently as a result of this Stalin-Hitler pact, there existed postal communication. So I know that existed. I know they didn't -- they did not have telephones, cell phones, whatever. But they probably wrote. I don't know the details because it never occurred to me as a kid to ask such things. And they never volunteered. You know, at that age there are certain things we were not being told. I was too small. I couldn't understand that.

>> Bill Benson: So with you and your mother in Warsaw, then the Nazis create the ghetto.

>> Sam Ponczak: We left -- my mother made the decision to do the same thing that my father did, escape to the east. She escaped with me about the time when the wall around the ghetto was being built. I would say she probably saw the light because she already had to wear the arm band and there was beatings and shootings. So she made that decision.

The only thing I know about it is what they, my mother and my father, was telling me. I was a kid. I don't remember these things.

>> Bill Benson: What do you know about how she escaped from the ghetto? That couldn't have been an easy thing to do.

>> Sam Ponczak: I know quite a bit. Well, she escaped -- she knew she had to escape and then get herself to the border. The border between the Nazi-occupied and the Soviet-occupied parts of Poland was like the boot on the map. But that was the natural border between the two countries. She was from that area, near that river, as my father was. They knew that the river was freezing in the winter. It was frozen. You could walk over it. So that was the decision. You had to be there. And I don't know exactly whether she was there with me January or in December 1940.

But the way she did it, one day she took me and whatever she could carry to the train station because she had to get somehow to that river. She went into a car, passenger car. And what happened there, she tells me, she saw a priest who waved her to come over. She recognized the priest by the way he was dressed. It's easy to recognize a priest in Poland. And the priest said get yourself and the kid behind me and take that arm band off. That's what she did. And then she tells me that whenever there was the gendarmes walking by checking documents, he would tell them the woman with the kid is from my parish. You know, the priest is very respected so they didn't search us or whatever.

Somehow, I do not know the details, how we got to the river but in my mind this priest saved my life. I don't know what would have happened had he not been there because somebody would probably denounce her or saw the arm band. Taking off the arm band, being Jewish, was the same thing as being condemned to be shot on the spot. There's no need for trial because that was the penalty for that.

>> Bill Benson: Once you got to the river -- I was struck by one of the things you said to me because, you know, she still has to do it clandestinely. You mentioned how sound travels on a

frozen river.

>> Sam Ponczak: It's sort of a funny story. Not only she needed to get to the river but she needed to wait for the night because on one side there were the Germans, the guards, and on the other side were the Russians. And they would shoot whoever was moving or whatever was moving. So she had to wait for the night.

So when night came, she put me on -- took me in her arms, I don't know, and she walked with me. The poor woman was slipping. It was slippery. She was sliding and falling. And to me it was fun. Because I had never seen my mother, you know, falling on ice. And she couldn't quiet me down. So she, in her infinite wisdom, gave me some pictures to hold, figuring that I'll keep my mouth shut and she'll be able to walk through. Well, I kept my mouth shut but by the time, she tells me, we got to the other side all the pictures were torn up. So my sister resents me because of that. There is no pre-war pictures in my family now.

>> Bill Benson: Once you got to the Soviet side, of course the Soviets and Nazis were allies, was there any risk of them just sending you back?

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, she was telling me she remembers there were dogs and people with guns. We were caught basically by the Soviets, Soviet guard, border guards or whoever they were. We probably were arrested at that time. Luckily they let us in. Frequently if they had some reasons, they would tell the people to go back for some reason. In our case they didn't.

And don't anybody ask me how we met with my father because I don't know. I only know that the Secret Service in that time, probably today, too, in Soviet, they know everything, where everybody is. And somehow the two of us got connected with my father. I don't know exactly when. I don't know whether it was weeks or months or so after we made it to the other side but we got connected. I was at the time about 2 1/2 or 3 years old, so I don't remember. But I do know that we were sent to Siberia, to western Siberia.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about Siberia, you shared with me that when you did reunite with your father, one of your first recollections -- and maybe it was in Siberia -- your father was working as a lumberjack.

>> Sam Ponczak: It was in the camp. The camp was an old Gulag camp, which is an exiled camp. So my earliest recollections are from -- my earliest recollection as a child, I remember seeing my father up to his neck in water and pushing the trunks of trees down the river.

So later on, of course I learned and realized, it was purely a labor camp. And that was part of the time. The only thing that plentiful there are trees. So this tailor become like a lumberjack or something and everybody else in that camp was doing that. Well, I have more stories about that.

>> Bill Benson: And I want you to share those with us. Going to Siberia, going across the entire continent of Russia.

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Why were you sent to Siberia?

>> Sam Ponczak: I don't know. I suppose it was already the time when the war between Germany -- well, in 1941 began the war between the Soviets and Germany. I suppose the Soviets needed whatever labor force they could get because their labor force was in uniform fighting. So they needed other labor force. And the refugees or the escapees served that purpose. We were not on the far east in Siberia. We were before the Euro -- very up north. It's a very cold part of Siberia.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what you remember about life there.

>> Sam Ponczak: In hindsight -- I talked with my father many, many, many years later. I

remember images and the thing that struck me were the images of people, the faces. It was like not natural. I remember angry faces, distorted faces, unhappy. So I asked my father what was it, why the people were there. So he says, look, this was a mix of Poles and Jews and they worked their tail off. They had to work very hard to get the portions -- and they were deprived of their typical necessity, typically men who smoked had no cigarettes to smoke. Those who drank had no vodka to drink. So they used to smoke moss. They would roll moss into a newspaper. And that did something to their minds. And that's why they were -- and hunger and the tiredness. There were people who were not used to physical labor. Maybe they were, I don't know, doctors or whatever. So they were unhappy.

And interestingly, he said there was no alcohol to drink but there was plenty of [Indiscernible]. So in desperation people were drinking that stuff and I suppose it did something to their brains. That's the only thing he could tell me to explain this image that I recall from those times.

>> Bill Benson: One of the things you shared with me was that -- I think when you first got to the camp or for a period of time you were living in a yurt.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. In the camp or near the camp there was an old lady who lived in a yurt. A yurt is like a Indian wigwam, you know, tent, if you were. Actually it's a Mongolian type of place to live. So we were put, at some point in time, into that yurt and living with her. I remember the best place was on top of an oven where you boiled water so it was hot. I remember the yurt -- the natives of that area stem from I think Mongolia. They have their own language but, of course, the dominant language was Russian. And eventually Russian became my first language. As a conscientious kid I spoke Russian because that's what I heard.

>> Bill Benson: Did start school while you were in camp in Siberia? Not yet?

>> Sam Ponczak: I was too young. I do remember -- first we spend I suppose about half a year in that labor camp. And then we were sent further north, like you said, to the capital of that region, Syktyvkar. And that's where my father was employed in a big tailoring factory which made uniforms for the Soviet military. And my mother was in a different tailoring factory. And she also was sewing. I guess there was no system what do you do with the kids. So I remember hanging around in the factory with my father for some time or with my mother, even helping them turn the sewing machine as entertainment. But anyhow, eventually the people in charge, whatever, administration, they formed like kindergartens or the kids. So I was placed in one of those.

The event I remember well is the birth of my two twin brothers. I remember when they were born. I was in the hospital. My parents took me there. And then the next thing, must have been a few months later, I remember when they died. So I also was taken to take a look at them.

>> Bill Benson: And that was while you were in the camp?

>> Sam Ponczak: That's when I was in that town of Syktyvkar.

Growing up as a kid, I remember the event but I didn't ask my parents. They didn't volunteer. And that's how years went by. I just never found out why they died. I can only speculate but I don't want to. And I am sure that it was very hard for my mother to do some explaining. So I never learned anything more about that.

>> Bill Benson: In 1944, you were taken from Siberia and from there you went to the Ukraine to live. Tell us why that happened, if you know, and then what was life like for you and your family once you settled in the Ukraine.

>> Sam Ponczak: Yeah, I do know. I was talking many years later, when I grew up, talking with

my father mostly. It turns out that the Soviets were offering citizenship to some of these refugees, etc. but my parents were wise enough not to accept it. Their main goal was to return to Poland to find their relatives. They were afraid that if they take the citizenship, most likely the Soviet government will not let them go back to Poland. So they didn't.

>> Bill Benson: Was your father under pressure to become a Communist?

>> Sam Ponczak: I really don't know. I suppose not being a citizen -- I don't know. I know he was liberal leftist all his life until one day he told me "I lost my faith," I lost my God, as it were. So he dropped the whole idea. That was when we were in France. But that was the reason we didn't stay.

In 1944, the war was coming closer to an end. Ukraine was already liberated. The Germans were in Poland mostly. So they made the decision to move us to the Ukraine. And I don't exactly remember that trip. But I remember being in the Ukraine and they put us in a small settlement near this town where my sister was born, where I saw how they celebrated the end of World War II. That's when I found out that I was Jewish. Because, you know when a child is small, he doesn't know who he is until either somebody tells him or he learns somehow.

I learned it in a couple of ways. One day I remember walking with my parents to a farmer's market to buy some food or whatever, and I remember a paraplegic man, had no limbs below his knees, was pushing himself on this cart. He came up to the three of us. He looks at us and he starts cursing us in Russian. I understood it. He said, "You damn Jews. How the heck did you survive? Blah, blah, blah. Offensive, very offensive. So I asked my father what's this about. So that was my first explanation, that we looked like or we act like Jews. So I learned that.

There was another event from that place where my father took me one day to a place that I didn't know what it was but it was a big room filled with young men in Soviet uniforms with their guns, you know, like the Army. And what was strange is I remember them doing like that, and mumbling something. The most important thing, I saw them crying. I couldn't understand. Military young soldiers crying? That doesn't make any sense. I just noticed it.

Many years later, really many years later, I remembered and I asked my father what was that, where were we. So he says it was a makeshift synagogue and it was the holiday of Yom Kippur and these were Jewish soldiers who returned from Poland or Germany. That is a day of atonement, whatever, but they cried, he told me, because of what they saw in Poland and in Germany. And what they saw was either the concentration camps and the survivors there or the dead there. So it does a job on you even if you are 20-some years old. So that's why, I suppose, they cried. But there were events that stick in my mind.

>> Bill Benson: One of the things that you shared with me, and this is what you said, that one day a young lady showed up and your father said, "That's your sister."

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. That's true. Like you say, this young lady showed up. And my father says, "That's your sister." Well, it's a long story. When my father was a young boy, went to Warsaw, he was taken in by a family that was friendly with his parents, from the little town. And that family became like his family. So he literally grew up as a young man, learned the trade and so on. At the time when we left, when my mother and I escaped, they also -- that family, the parents and two girls, and that family also lived in what was the Warsaw Ghetto. When we left, we said goodbye, I guess. We disappeared. In the meantime what we know, is that family eventually, when the ghetto was being liquidated, they were one of the many tens of

thousands stuffed on the train, sent to Treblinka to be killed. That was the only purpose of Treblinka, to kill. So this was the parents and the two girls.

The parents made the decision to talk to the oldest girl to jump off the train, convince her and help her to jump off the train and she did. She was about 15 years old, maybe 16. And she actually with another girl jumped off, too, they survived walking through the forest wearing the Jewish partisan and so on. They were even caught. And one day when this future -- who became my sister tells me that they were caught by the Germans. They were going to be shot the next day, they were told. So the two, these two girls, actually killed the soldier that was watching them. I don't know how they managed. But when she was telling me that, she couldn't stop crying.

Well, anyhow, so that girl with her friend, they actually were able to cross the front line between the Germans and the Soviets. It's not like over hundreds of miles there's one soldier. They cross. And they entered the Soviet Union. She knew about my family. She knew that there were parents and a boy, that's me, somewhere in Russia.

>> Bill Benson: Somewhere in Russia.

>> Sam Ponczak: Somewhere in Russia. It took a year to find the somewhere. So one day she knocks on the door and comes up and they hug and kiss. And then my father says, "That's your sister." And that's how she became my sister.

>> Bill Benson: Sam, once the war ended you were allowed to return to Poland. Tell us what it meant for you to return to Poland and what happened once you got there.

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, to me it was another unknown place. Took us literally three weeks in cattle cars in 1946, February. It was cold. Those cattle cars are not really warm. I remember the trip. So we showed up in an interesting place. Later on I was thinking -- I don't know if you know that but when the war was coming to an end, the big trio of Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, they sat, they talked, and they made some decisions where they took a piece of Germany, eastern Germany, and they gifted it to Poland, took part of eastern Poland and gifted it to Stalin. So we were sent to the German part of Poland -- Germany, rather, the eastern part of Germany that became Poland. We came to this town called Reichenbach, I remember still the name on the train station. And we spent a few weeks in a big dorm. And then eventually we got an apartment with some German elderly woman.

And let me tell you just briefly about this town. It was almost void of people. Because the Germans that lived there, those who knew better, they escaped somewhere into Germany. But there were some, mostly elderly, people that stayed. And I witnessed what I later call an ethnic cleansing. It was a town that was not destroyed. A small little Germantown that there was no reason to bomb the hell out of it. So it ended up a town full of decent housing, shops, that was almost empty of people. And the elderly German woman also left. And I remember lines of mostly older Germans going to the train station. They were allowed to move themselves out into, I don't know, eastern or western Germany at the time, in 1946. I think it was going on until about 1947.

So we ended up owning an apartment. That was for the first time I lived in a regular apartment. The bathroom was in the staircase but never mind. My main problem was that I didn't know Polish. I was in Poland. I did not know Polish. So my father -- my parents had all kinds of problems with what to do with me and so on. But eventually I enrolled in the school and that's how my career started.

>> Bill Benson: You told me I think it was once you were in that apartment that that home became a gathering place for survivors. Tell us a little about that.



>> Sam Ponczak: Yes, well, that town actually had a very large population of surviving Jews. In 1946, 1947, there were about 25,000 Jews, which was a lot for a town. It was an empty town but it was not just Jewish. They had also people from eastern Poland who were displaced from that town who also came to live if that place.

Now, things that I observed in that town. There were not too many children. Most people were single. My family was unusual in the sense of a real family: father, mother, two children, you know, like a family. But typically the survivors were either single men, single women, some elderly, very few children. So these were survivors.

And my mother was a very hospitable kind of woman. She always, for the weekends, she had lunches and whatever. People would come, gather. And they would talk. And typically they would talk Yiddish because that's the language they all knew. And that's a language that I understood, maybe didn't talk it well but I did understand. And the typical conversation was how did you survive, have you seen such and such, do you know of such and such. And, of course, they were crying, drinking vodka, eating. That was the main topic of conversation.

I remember a few people who actually survived Auschwitz. One of them eventually became closer to me through my future wife. Somebody called Mendl. He was a young man. He survived Auschwitz. I remember him talking about when he stayed behind the wires, he saw other Jews being led to the gas chambers. And those that were being led, they knew what is coming. And the typical -- the yelling back and forth, "Remember us," "Tell what happened to us," "Remember us". I remember that conversation and similar conversations.

Why I'm leading up to this because it has something to do with me here now. When I went into retirement, I was thinking about what to do. I decided to volunteer here and do some translation, etc. And among the translation that I was doing years later, talking about 10 years ago or so, where interviews with Poles -- there was a whole series of interviews done in the 1980s, even '90s with Poles who were old enough to remember the war when they were kids. These were high school kids, maybe teenagers, teachers. And the idea was to tell what you have seen looking from outside. That was the theme of the interviews.

Of course, at the time of the interviews these people were in their 80s. I mean, 80s, even 90s. They were retelling what they were seeing when they were that tender age of some-teen, teenagers, what have you. So there was this one man who was in his mid-80s at the time. He says he remembers that as a kid he saw a column of Jews, you know, mixed men, women, children, being led into a forest. And they knew why. And these people, they were led by the Germans or Ukrainians, I don't know, guards to be executed. And they also knew what was going to happen. And they were yelling to the kids on the side of the road -- these were Polish kids so they just happened to be there -- and said "Pray to God," "Pray to God," "Tell about us," "Tell about us." I translate this video and I remember this guy Mendl, "Tell us,," "Tell us." So that for me was the tipping point about telling. So that's when I started to translate the video interviews, the other documents, etc.

>> Bill Benson: There's so much more you can share with us and our time is starting to get short. You would remain in Poland under the Communist government for another decade until the late 1950s but you were eventually able to leave Poland and went to France. You were not allowed to stay in France. Tell us about that.

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, in Poland we lived -- the Jews who survived came back, lived -- first of all, we were under a Communist regime. And the Communist regime doesn't talk about Holocaust. There was no such thing. Especially don't talk about Jews, etc. So you know, my

brain was washed like everybody else's brain.

In 1957 -- 1956 and 1957, there was another wave of anti-Semitism. That's typically when the government has some reason to stir up the pot. So we had to leave because it was under the name Polish workers don't want Jews to be their directors, telling them what to do. You know, that kind of stuff. I personally think that the reason was for -- one way to get rid of a bunch of people. Take it as it were.

So we were told -- we were not told but, you know, it's a mass hysteria. After pogrom, after a lot of things that happened after the war, so we said, well, -- well, my parents made the decision. I was too young to make decisions at that time. But we decided to go, like the rest of the people.

Now, the condition was, yes, you take whatever you can carry and, I forgot, \$20 a person. So we left with passports. The passports expired I think either 30 or 90 days after we crossed the border. So at that time we became stateless.

>> Bill Benson: You're not Polish. You're not French.

>> Sam Ponczak: We're nothing. We don't have any country behind us.

At the same time, we were going to go to Israel but plans had changed because that sister of mine that I was telling you, who already went to Israel before that, wrote to us do not come because Sara, my mother, would not survive the climate and the condition. So my parents decided -- they had to go to Israel but they decided to take a detour to go via France to Israel. And the plan was to get on the train and hopefully be able to stay in France. Unfortunately that didn't happen.

>> Bill Benson: And because you were stateless you were deemed illegal immigrants and you had to leave France at some point.

>> Sam Ponczak: I don't think they ever made us immigrants. We just had this undefined status.

>> Bill Benson: No status.

>> Sam Ponczak: No status. I remember trying to stay away from the cops because they extended my papers. I mean, I had some temporary papers. I had to report to the police every now and then. And after a while -- and I didn't have the right to work or to study. I was in this transit. I was constantly in transit.

So at some point in time they arrested myself and parents and said you have to go. So we ended up going to Argentina. Why? Because a main reason was because my father had a brother in Argentina who was there since the time before the war. And also he helped us by sending us money to get tickets on the ship to go to Argentina. So that's where we ended up going to Argentina.

>> Bill Benson: Then I think in 1964 was it?

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. 1964 -- by the way, I was in Argentina in 1960 when Eichmann was caught.

>> Bill Benson: In Argentina.

>> Sam Ponczak: Right. But anyhow, in '64 -- well, I was working -- we still never got the legal status of immigrants. We were stateless even in Argentina. So because of conditions -- I wanted to study. I ended up being a bandager for my parents' tailoring business. So I was the salesman, the buyer, the guy who kept their accounts. And I learned the language. But I didn't see myself much of a future here. So I decided to enroll at the university. I said I want to be an engineer. So my father says, ok, go ahead. I'll find a job somewhere else.

And I went there. This guy tells me, listen, you don't know our history, our country.

Even though you speak, but you don't know our culture. And besides that, we do not recognize the Polish high school diploma because we think that they are on a very low level. So basically he told me, actually to go to eighth grade. I was at the time 25 or something. And he said that's the only way. And I didn't have a citizenship. I didn't have anything. So I felt all the doors were closed, as far as I'm concerned.

Anyhow, but I managed -- well, it's a story that takes too long to talk about. But eventually we are able to obtain an immigration visa for my parents and my father as a tailor, as a professional tailor. He was hired by -- I don't know how many of you know. There used to be a Hamburger store in Baltimore. It was a men's clothing chain of stores. And the owner somehow sent us an invitation, a contract for my father. So my father, my mother, my sister was able to come on an immigration visa. I couldn't because I was too old. So I had to come as a foreign student. And as a foreign student, you may know, you finish your education and you go back or go somewhere.

Well, I choose that. I came with them in 1964. It was a very moving experience for me. I was standing on the deck of the SS United States which was a flagship of the American fleet then, rode into the New York Harbor and saw the lady with the torch and I was moved. But anyhow, I ended up I came and enrolled at the University of Maryland, like you said, and I met Freida. And once we got married I became an immigrant here I got a green card. The rest is history.

>> Bill Benson: I think -- bring turn to our audience for a couple of questions I think we have time. You were just only able to touch on a little bit about what you went through during that whole time, the many different moves, ending up in the United States. What do you think enabled your parents, as well as you, to be able to survive and adapt to so many different upheavals, cultures, places?

>> Sam Ponczak: We had a very strong feeling of family unit. We all hustled. I had no training, really, until I came to Paris and I needed to work. So my father found some tailor. He already was working. I became a tailor apprentice, whatever, and did some work to have some money. We all needed to pitch in to have some food and roof over the head. So family unity -- you know, you survive and you see people who lost parents or children. We had a family that became very important for us. So I couldn't say, no, I'm not going to crazy Argentina because I have other plans. Even at my tender age of 20-something. So it was all -- you pulled the cart together. So that was the main idea. And that's how we survived. Once we were in the states, well, my father found a good job, my mother was working also, and I was free to apply and do my thing.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Sam.

In a minute we're going to turn back to Sam to close our program but I do think we have time for one or two questions. When Sam's finished, he will remain here on the stage and we would invite you, welcome you to come up on stage and meet Sam, shake his hand and ask him some other questions. But we have time for a couple of questions.

If you have a question, we have microphones in the aisle. So we want you to go to the microphone. I know it's a big deal. If you have a question, please make it as brief as you can. I'll repeat it just to make sure that we understand the question before Sam responds to it. And if not, if there's no questions, I'm looking out here -- here we come, a brave soul.

>> Hello, Sam. Did your parents ever talk about anti-Semitism in Poland before the war?

>> Sam Ponczak: Yes, they did. And I'm very well aware of the anti-Semitism before the war and the political situation. So I am in touch and fully aware of today's problems.

If you allow me, I'll just tell my thoughts. I feel we're living in some way perilous times where with anti-Semitism growing all over the world, including in this country, and of course in Poland, Hungary, you name it, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, openly -- sometimes it is disguised as freedom of speech. Well, this is what happened during the war and after the war in Poland and in other countries, Eastern Europe. It's not by accident. It's because the anti-Semitism was there for a very long time. I ask you to think about it. And I ask you to think about history. Because like somebody said, if you forget, you tend to repeat it.

For example, a few days ago I was very upset, myself, because I was looking at the "The Washington Post" or television for a sign: Do you know the 9th of May was the end of World War II? There was not one word written. At least I couldn't find anything. This is forgetting history. I know that 70 or whatever years earlier when World War II ended, there were two million people just on Times Square. And just last week or whatever it was, there was not a word, at least I couldn't find any, that there was an end of World War II. It was a forgotten event. And that brings on the anti-Semitism, etc. To me this is a not-so-hidden danger. It was not fashionable to do it but unfortunately -- you know what I'm talking about.

Listen, this may be an appeal but it's only my appeal. I don't represent the museum in here. The museum has their own speakers for them.

I don't know if I answered your question. I am aware.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to have to close the program. We'll take one more question.

>> Yes, your parents being Jews, did they have faith in God that got them through this time?

>> Bill Benson: The role of your parents' faith for all they went through.

>> Sam Ponczak: Well, talking to people who had literally survived the ghettos in the concentration camp, because I am not in the same category. I was made to understand many people who are religious lost their religion. On the other hand there were many who were not, accepted it. The reaction of people depended on each individual. You know, it was not the same.

For example, I mentioned my father was telling me that there were trains, the regular trains, and there were Jews who were already in that Soviet Russia and they were getting into the trains going back to Warsaw. Now, those my father couldn't understand because, of course, he made the other decision, the other way. And when he -- and I -- when he and I talked about it, I asked how could anybody, and he says you wouldn't believe it. There was a German officer standing on the top of the wagon and saying "Jews, where are you going? Our Fuhrer doesn't want you." They said he doesn't know what he's talking to.

Who are these people? Well, many of them were religious Jews who when they ended up in Soviet Russia were very uncomfortable because that was a state that persecuted religion. So they wanted to go back. And they thought, he tells me, that it will be just like during World War I. They were not touched. You know. They were warned. So they went to their doom.

>> Bill Benson: We're going to close our program now. I want to thank all of you for being with us, remind you we'll have programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August.

I'm going to ask you -- hold on. Don't jump up quite yet. We have one more task. Our photographer, Joel, will come up on the stage, take a photograph of Sam with you as the background. So I don't want your backs to us if that's ok. So bear with us. When Joel comes up on stage in just a moment. And then we'll conclude our program.

Thank you all.

Remember, we welcome you to come up on stage after if you have a question you

didn't get to ask or to get a photograph.  
>> [Applause]