

REALTIME FILE

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
FIRST PERSON SUSAN DARVAS
JUNE 14, 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*. Thank you for joining us. We are in our 19th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Susan Darvas, 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, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Susan 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 Susan 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 Susan is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Susan was born Susan Lakatos on April 24, 1934, in Budapest, Hungary. She grew up in a Jewish family. This is a photo of her at age 3 on a tricycle. Her father Mano owned his own dental practice and her mother assisted in the dental practice.

On this map of Europe, we see where Hungary is located.

The arrow on this map of Hungary points to the city of Budapest.

Susan was an only child but had a large extended family. Here we see her maternal grandparents. In September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland beginning World War II. Fearing the worst, Susan's uncle Laszlo decided to immigrate to England to protect his two young daughters. Laszlo tried to convince Susan's father Mano to join him, but was unsuccessful as Mano believed Hungary would be safe from Nazi invasion.

This photo was taken of Susan's extended family after her Uncle Laszlo left Hungary. On the left in front is Susan's mother, Susan is the little girl in the middle, and to the right is her aunt. Susan's father is directly behind her. Also shown are two of Susan's other uncles and a cousin.

In March 1944, Germany occupied Hungary and began forcing Jews who lived outside of Budapest to relocate to ghettos in city centers. By mid-May of 1944, the Hungarian authorities, in coordination with the German Security Police, began to systematically deport Hungarian Jews. Jews in the city of Budapest were at first spared deportations.

In late 1944, through his connections with non-Jews in Hungary, Manos was able to secure an affidavit which allowed the family to move into an area of the city under the protection of the Spanish government. They had five families crowded into their one small apartment and food and water were scarce. This map of Budapest and environs shows the location of the international ghetto.

This zoomed-in map shows the location of the international ghetto, which is to your upper left-hand side.

By early 1945, attacks from the Allies were becoming more and more frequent. Soviet forces liberated the Buda section of the city in February 1945. Soviet troops drove the last German units and their Arrow Cross collaborators out of western Hungary in early April 1945. Shortly thereafter, a communist regime began in Hungary. Susan escaped communist Hungary with her husband in 1956 and they eventually made their way to the United States.

We close with this photo of Susan and her mother in 1947.

Following Susan and her husband's escape from Hungary and a stay in a refugee camp, they made it to England where they lived until moving to the United States in 1958. They lived in Chicago for four years before relocating to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Susan pursued graduate education at the University of Michigan and where her husband was a professor of architecture. Susan obtained Masters Degrees in Library Science and Comparative Literature and completed all but her dissertation toward a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature.

In 1972, Susan moved to Washington, D.C, and went to work for the Library of Congress for eight years. Later, she earned a Masters in Clinical Social Work at the Catholic University National School of Social Work. She then went to work as a clinician at the Johns Hopkins Compulsive Gambling Treatment Center, and later became Director of Family Services for the Compulsive Gambling Program at Taylor Manor Hospital in Ellicott City, Maryland. Subsequently, Susan worked for the Department of Defense as a clinician in the Employee Assistance Service until her retirement in 2009, but has remained in various clinical capacities as a contractor. Susan continues today with DOD as a consultant psychotherapist and does executive coaching. She also maintains a part-time private practice in psychotherapy.

Susan has two children and five grandchildren. Daughter Andrea is a judge in Washington State and has twins age 31. Her son Peter is recently retired as a special agent from the Naval Criminal Investigative Service - or NCIS - and is now a senior special investigator with San Diego County. Peter has three children, ages 23 to 17.

Besides occasional volunteer work with this museum's library, Susan volunteers in her community in suburban Maryland for "Neighbor Drive," providing rides for senior citizens to the doctor and other appointments. She loves nature, walking and hiking, travel, literature, opera, and classical music. Susan has almost completed the first draft of her memoir, which I look forward to reading when published.

Susan is joined today by several close friends of hers.

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

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Susan, thank you so much for joining us and being willing to be our First Person today. We are excited about having you with us. I know you have so much to share with us in a very short period so we'll get started if that's ok with you.

>> Susan Darvas: Thank you very much for having me. This is a real honor.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Susan.

Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, the year before your birth. Before you tell us about what you and your family went through during the Holocaust, and World War II, tell us about your family and you in your early years before the war began. I know you were very young but from what you know, tell us a little bit about your family and their circumstances.

>> Susan Darvas: Well, you all have seen that silly little picture on the tricycle. We lived at that time in Pest. Budapest are really two cities old enough to see the crumbling corridors that my bicycle -- I rode my bicycle on. But pretty soon we moved over to Buda within half a year of that picture because my father had emphysema, from a young age, and he needed the fresh air of Buda. And that was wonderful for me because I just roamed the hills. It's a beautiful, beautiful area.

We lived in a flat, in a two-story villa. I thought it was a palace. Bright and beautiful. It had a balcony. I have very fond memories of that for the first couple of years. But I was an only child and pretty much alone except for the two cousins who moved to England in 1939. So I didn't have too much chance to enjoy them. I was an only child and pretty spoiled, spoiled rotten. I was the apple of my parents' eyes. I was very fortunate to have very bright, loving, nurturing background.

>> Bill Benson: Susan, tell us a little bit about your father. He had a successful dental practice but he was also a prominent man, as you put it to me, for the time, very broad-minded.

>> Susan Darvas: Well, the emancipated Jews, which meant my father was basically an

agnostic but a strong Jewish identity. So I grew up learning about the whole world, not just a small country I was in. He traveled widely, really widely, in Western Europe. Just before the war broke out. I heard lots of stories. He told me tales of Greek mythology as well as the Old Testament and the New Testament and geography. I remember him showing me the map when I was 5 or 6. I knew geography because those were the places where he told me I would be able to see eventually.

He was also a social activist, today we would call it, a permanent member of the social Democratic Party in Hungary at the time. This was a very progressive party. Not Communist. This is important in view of what happens later, after the war. But he was well-known, well connected even as a Jew which was unusual at the time. He was also the president of the Dental Technician National Association. So he really had leadership, strong leadership abilities.

>> Bill Benson: And how about your mother Margit? Tell us a little bit about her.

>> Susan Darvas: Well, my mother, as you saw, was really beautiful I think. Very loving. Very nurturing in her good moments, but she also had bad moments. She suffered from anxiety for good reasons, most of her life. She lost her mother when she was maybe 15, 14 or 15. And then older sister, the only sister she had, died very young as well. So she was basically abandoned by her father who married a pretty crazy woman. She was kind of drifting around, being taken care of, her cousins once removed, which included my father, by the way. She was 18 years younger. And eventually when my father was 40, they discovered that they didn't just have a mentorship relationship but they were in love with each other. And it was a long and happy marriage.

>> Bill Benson: Before we turn to the war itself, as we mentioned in the beginning, your Uncle Laszlo moved with his family and your two cousins. Tell us a little bit more about his attempts to get your father to go and why your father didn't take him up on that opportunity.

>> Susan Darvas: Well, bright as my father was, intelligent as he was, he was an idealist. He was like so many people in Hungary, convinced that what was happening in the rest of the world would never happen in Hungary. Evil was so extreme that it was incomprehensible. He didn't see the flood coming. I call it the flood. And he really thought that the war would end in no time at all, the allies would be victorious, and everything will go back to normal. So he didn't leave.

>> Bill Benson: And, of course, the war began with Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939. Tell us what you can about what it was like for your family and you in those first several years of the war.

>> Susan Darvas: Well -- so when the war broke out, my father and the rest of the 600,000 Jews in Hungary were, of course, trapped. There was nowhere to go. I was sent to first grade early. Maybe I was not quite 5. And in the very beginning I went to an embassy school, so I learned English as well as Hungarian but, of course, after the war broke out that was shut down. I had to repeat the grade in a public school. At that point I was for the first time directly experiencing anti-semitism. Kids I had been playing with started calling me "dirty Jew," refused to play with me. Or those who wanted to play with me were not allowed to play with me. And I was completely confused. I had a lot of self-confidence because I was a cherished child and I just could not understand what was happening. I thought it was bizarre.

I don't know whether I should speak more, but part of the confusion was about the dirty Jew business. I was a very clean child. [Laughter] My mother was also insisting that I was extremely, thoroughly, right? In fact, I was much cleaner than most of the kids who called me

dirty Jew. So I was confused and went to my father for explanation. He was a very rational man most of the time. He explained to me that this was a metaphor. Of course I didn't know what a metaphor was.

In a way, I remember to this day because from then on I never took anything literally but tried to find some kind of meaning behind it. However, it was still devastating because I became [Inaudible].

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the distant relative of yours who came to your home from Transylvania which their visit caused you, what you described to me, as a sense of foreboding. Will you say a little about that?

>> Susan Darvas: Well, you know, when you're a child, your mind processes things differently. So even though things were difficult, I saw the headlines in the newspapers, the news reels, in the movie houses, was subjected to quite a bit of discrimination and abuse, it was real but it wasn't fully real. And then one day some people I never met, in traditional garb from Transylvania, which is now Romania, came for dinner, Sunday dinner. And there was five or six people, adults. They were three generations. And I overheard, because I was allowed to roam around freely, you know, horrible tales of murder, pogroms, concentration camps, which was totally unknown to me. And I don't think that I observed much of it but that's when I for the first time experienced something terrible, something was terribly wrong. Something was terribly dangerous. I was so upset I had to leave the table. So that's when the trauma began. You know, I was about 5 or 6.

>> Bill Benson: You described to me also that from where you lived in Buda you had a balcony and your father brought you out on the balcony to watch -- bombings were beginning. Tell us a little bit about that.

>> Susan Darvas: My dad was interesting. You know, the Allies started bombing actually quite early. It didn't become severe until, I think -- certainly by 1943 and '44 but this may have been around 1941.

At that time, the air raids would be directed towards industrial targets and railroads, tactical bombing. From our vantage point, from the hills still in Buda, you could -- had a fantastic view of Pest, of the other side of the river and the outskirts of town. So my father called me out to the balcony from my favorite cherry tree, where I had a tree house, to witness some of the battles. It was so vivid, these red trajectories surrounding the place and occasionally plunging. I couldn't tell that it was the good place or the bad place, whether it was Nazi planes or Allied planes. My father seemed to know. And he was so excited. He said, "You see? The war will be over in no time. The Allies will win. We are good." But we weren't.

>> Bill Benson: One of the other things that you shared was because Hungary, of course, was an ally of Germany and Hungarian troops were on the fighting against the Russians on the Eastern front, you had to knit socks --

>> Susan Darvas: You remember that?

>> Bill Benson: I do. Tell us about that.

>> Susan Darvas: For the one year that I was allowed to go to school, because after that Jews couldn't go to school, in Jewish houses and later ghettos so I went to this public school. And one of the projects in the school in wartime was to support the troops. And the way we did that in school, was to knit -- of course, the Hungarians were sent to the Siberian Russian front. The Germans didn't want to kill their own. So the kids were supposed to knit warm scarves and warm socks and leg warmers.

Now, I wasn't a good knitter anyway but I was forced to do this. And I was so

conflicted. I really didn't want to support the troops. Right? Because they were on the wrong side. On the other hand, there were parents and brothers of people I knew and cared for and loved. It was a big dilemma. Do I refuse to knit, which I couldn't anyway, but pretend I can't knit or do I knit? From my child's mind the solution lay in, ok, I knit but it's going to be very ugly.

>> [Laughter]

>> Susan Darvas: So I dropped as many stitches as I knew how. That tells about my character a little bit, at least early on.

>> Bill Benson: Susan, at some point you and your family were forced to leave your home in the Buda part of Budapest and move to Pest. Where were you forced to move and what did that move mean for you and your family?

>> Susan Darvas: Ok, I'll be brief about it. We didn't actually move. You were essentially expelled. It was from one day to another. So you had to leave everything behind and move into one of the designated Jewish houses this was immediate because -- in fact, the house we moved in -- at that point we could at least choose where you moved.

>> Bill Benson: You could choose which of the Jewish houses you moved into?

>> Susan Darvas: Yeah. Jews could live there. They had to triple and quadruple and quintuple up in apartments that were previously occupied with maybe a couple. In our case it was actually my uncle who lived at the edge of what became later the ghetto, literally one street beyond what would become later the ghetto.

So we packed a suitcase each. I was told to pick my favorite book and toy, which I did. You know, like an overnight suitcase. And off we went. There was no time. There was no time.

The Jewish house, the crowding became even worse later. It was difficult to imagine. The apartment had one kitchen, of course, one bathroom, and a toilet, half-bath. Most of the time there were at least 10, 12 of us there but people were coming and going. Jews were fleeing the persecution in the country which was always a couple of steps ahead from Budapest, would take shelter there.

It was at that time we were ordered to wear the Jewish star on all outward clothing. You couldn't go out -- first of all, we had curfews so there were only three hours during the day that we could leave the house. It was an apartment building, very old, crumbling. And only with the Jewish star on our coats or jackets or whatever it was. It was pretty humiliating. And it was a big yellow star.

>> Bill Benson: And you shared with me that you had to cut them out yourselves?

>> Susan Darvas: My mother did. And if you didn't wear it -- again, it was overnight that this came out. Then you were arrested and never to be seen again.

>> Bill Benson: And along with the wearing the yellow star many other restrictions were imposed on you, curfews were set. That affected your ability to get food. So how were you able to eat during that time?

>> Susan Darvas: Not very well. During the three hours when we were allowed to be out -- now, mind you, at this point food became scarce for the whole city. So by the time we were allowed to be out, there was very little left. So food became very scarce. It was somewhat supplemented so we weren't starving yet.

It was scarce, shortages you didn't have too much of a variety to eat. But we still have enough to be on this side of starvation, on the good side. Because friends, gentile friends, would drop by surreptitiously so they are not seen with care packages, bringing food. There were many good people. There were many evil people but there were many good

people in the city. So while they could, they helped.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to go back to when you were first forced out of Buda. I was struck by something you said. You remembered people coming and going because your parents were trying to save some of their possessions by giving them to people for safe keeping.

>> Susan Darvas: Everybody did that. When you were evicted, basically that's what it was, evicted from your normal home and all you could take was a suitcase, right? What do you do? You leave it behind for the fascists to have it? So you gave away some. And then friends would volunteer to save it for you for when the war is over, which is around the corner, "This couldn't last."

So you see the dismantling --

>> Bill Benson: People taking your furniture and going.

>> Susan Darvas: And not just furniture, clothing. Oh, I don't know, knickknacks that you loved, toys.

>> Bill Benson: I wanted to also ask you, Jewish men were forced to go into forced labor in labor battalions to support the war effort. This affected your father, too.

>> Susan Darvas: Well, yes. He was taken twice. Miraculously he was able to somehow get out of it. I think through his connections but not immediately. It took a while.

>> Bill Benson: He was sent off at least twice.

>> Susan Darvas: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: As terrible as it was for Jews in Hungary, it, of course, became far worse when Germany occupied Hungary in March of 1944. Tell us what you can about how things really changed for everybody but for you and your family when that happened.

>> Susan Darvas: It went from bad to worse to put it mildly. Today we would call it a reign of terror to me everything that happens after that point was reign of terror. But the true reign of terror started at that point because there was a government takeover, the then governor of Hungary collaborated with the Germans but he maintained enough control so the worse atrocities he would not allow, that is the mass murder.

But when he was overthrown by the pro-Nazi faction, by the Arrow Cross party, the Hungarian Nazis, then all hell broke loose for real. The deportations, the mass shootings on the streets, in the apartments started. I don't know how much you want to hear about it. It's pretty dismal. But we were in fear all the time.

>> Bill Benson: And one incident that is just so powerful that you shared was when you were able to go on an outing to Buda when you were taken there. Will you tell us about that?

>> Susan Darvas: Well, I was shut out in that dingy old house. I think you talked about it, even today I need to be outdoors. I need to be out in nature. So I was starved for sunshine and just getting out.

At one point an old friend of my father and her boyfriend who happened to be an officer, which means the German Army -- not all Germans supported Hitler at that point but didn't know how to get out. So he was one of those who wanted to do some good I guess. So they came to visit us, which, of course, threw the house into absolute terror because here is a German officer.

>> Bill Benson: In your house.

>> Susan Darvas: Yeah. They didn't know who it was. Anyhow, they brought some food. And at some point because -- Lydia was her name -- knew me, she said, "We'll take you out. We know how you love to be outdoors," and I jumped to the opportunity. "Where do you want to go?" I wanted to go to my favorite -- well, Budapest is full with spring, hot springs. And one of

them feeds -- well, several of them. There are several. But there was a particular swimming pool, park, that I always went to as a child. And I said I want to go. And my mother, of course, won't let me go because it was very dangerous. If they discover you, you're gone, never to see daylight again. All right. But in the end, they gave in. So we went.

>> Bill Benson: You had to take your star off to go.

>> Susan Darvas: Of course, because Jews are not allowed. So anyhow, I had a great time for maybe a full hour. Then I had this terrible feeling of looming danger. I have no idea what tipped me off. So I asked to be taken home, which was very hard. But I guess my distress was so strong that they did follow suit. We found out, of course, the next day that within 10 minutes of our departure the Arrow Cross came looking for everybody's papers, wanting to pick up a Jewish child. So, yeah. That was my big adventure. I still remember it to this day.

>> Bill Benson: And your sense is that somebody recognized you and called --

>> Susan Darvas: Only truly explanation that somebody must have recognized me and called the police. There's a Jewish child here swimming and enjoying the sunshine. We can't have that. Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: At some point, Susan, your family was abruptly forced out of the Jewish house that you were in with your uncle, under just terrible circumstances describe what happened to you when you were forced out of that house.

>> Susan Darvas: Well, I like the way you put it, "forced." You know what they did? It's not forcing. A troupe comes in, you know, helmets and machine guns or whatever they had at that time and says, "Out." You can't pack anything. You just have to go out. You don't know where. You don't know whether you're going to be shot or taken to the concentration, anyhow. We were marched through town.

>> Bill Benson: With your hands up, right?

>> Susan Darvas: Yes. Elderly, adults, children, with our hands held above our heads. And if you dropped it, you were shot, so you didn't drop it. This went on for a while. The crowd surrounding you. Some of them with compassion. Many of them just grabbing whatever coat or jacket you had on or gloves or whatever. So it just went on for about an hour. It was very traumatic to put it mildly.

And then we were marched into the big synagogue in Budapest. So most of us were not shot, so we were packed in there like sardines in a tin. We couldn't go to the bathroom. You didn't know what happened. Occasionally they took out groups of us and took them to the railroad station. From there they were put in, you know, the crate cars that went to Auschwitz. So we knew this was just a question of time that it will be our turn.

After two days or so, no food, all kinds of other -- you can imagine the hysteria of the crowd. Everybody's children, babies, the old, the sick, we were let go. We were told, ok, that's it. We at first didn't believe it, thought it was a trick and we would be shot when leaving. But no. We were let go.

So we marched back to the apartment, the Jewish house. I never knew what happened. And, of course, today I know that it was Wallenburg or one of his men who was able to rescue us from the deportation by bribing the Germans, the Nazis so that was a lucky escape.

So we went back to the Jewish house. At that point even my father realized, ok, we've got to do something because it was clear that from here on we will be killed one way or another but also there would be the ghetto. And he already, I think -- I think he knew what was happening in Warsaw. Of course I didn't.

So he secured everybody who was able, secure an affidavit from one of the embassies who were willing to provide a protected house. A protected house meant that the Nazis were not supposed to enter it or take people away. And of course it was all actually an illusion. Because most of these affidavits turned out to be forgeries. But it brought time because it took the Nazis a while to figure that out. So we were bought some time to survive.

>> Bill Benson: Under the protection of the Spanish, the Spanish house.

>> Susan Darvas: Right.

>> Bill Benson: There was a Swiss protection house.

>> Susan Darvas: There were Swiss houses which turned out to be pretty useless after very little time because people were deported and taken out and shot from those. But the Swedish and Spanish houses had a bit more credibility, it seemed, at least for another month or two. So, again, it bought us time. But even that, of course, became neutralized and we were sitting ducks because they knew where we were.

>> Bill Benson: And what were your conditions like in the Spanish house?

>> Susan Darvas: Well, they were not good. If we thought the Jewish house was crowded, I mean, this was impossible. People slept on the floor. I slept under a piano because I was small and fit.

>> Bill Benson: That was the space you could find.

>> Susan Darvas: Yeah. These were nice, modern apartments actually, by the Danube, occupied by, you know, upper middle class folk who were taken away. So the furniture was still there which made it even more crowded. I don't know, at least 20 people in this two-bedroom place, one kitchen, etc. So it was very crowded.

But by this time -- actually, in the Jewish house the allied bombardments intensified, really intensified. So most people that could fit in would try to huddle in the cellar, which doubled as air raid shelters because there were no air raid shelters. The cellars were very cold, not finished. Coal was all over the place. That's what they use it for. So it was very dark, of course. And no heat. By that time there was no heat anywhere. The infrastructure was crumbling. So it was difficult.

But also, from the window you could see -- I could see at times a row of people lined up by the Danube. This was like an L with the street facing the Danube. And we were in the foot of the L. So I had a great deal of vision.

So people would be lined up in the distance and then they were gone. So those were the people who were taken out of the protected houses, shot, shot into the river.

>> Bill Benson: I was really both amazed and sort of awed -- awestruck by something you said about your father and some of the other men. I don't know if it was in the Spanish house or the Jewish house, but with under constant danger, constant threat of Nazis or Arrow Cross entering, your father had this map on the wall to track the allied advances.

>> Susan Darvas: You know, it was a question of survival. We knew that we were doomed unless we are liberated. Right? By the Allies. We knew, literally under the threat of death to radio through Europe and BBC, which were all clandestine things. I don't go into the details, but the men organized themselves -- that was before women's lib -- and would have a hiding place where they would listen at certain times to the news. So he knew the Allies were progressing and knew they were near. And that had to be tracked. So that was one reason, this hiding place, they would put up. And father being the leader, you know, head honcho, had the map. Very much like Churchill's war room. Later when I visited it I realized what they were doing. So that we knew what the progress was. And yes, they did that.

And it also served as an early warning system when the Nazis were approaching so that people could at least hide or grab some food and put it in their pockets or whatever it was. And we were couriers, some of us kids, couriers to spread the word. That was all we could possibly do.

>> Bill Benson: As the Russians advanced, an intense siege of Budapest was underway, bombings, artillery. And you and your family where you were located, you were absolutely in the midst of the siege of Budapest. A horrible period. Tell us what that was like.

>> Susan Darvas: Well, I don't know if any of you had any battle experience because it was like that. At first the aerial bombardments were so intense by that time that by the time the sirens came on, the bombs were already falling. In the end they didn't even bother with the sirens because it was constant.

But in addition to that, as Hungary was liberated by the Russian Army, Soviet Army so as they got into Budapest proper, obviously the aerial attacks -- in those days they couldn't be that precise so that stopped. So the artillery -- Budapest was surrounded by artillery and the artillery fire was constant, demolishing actually most of the buildings.

Even to this day there are few buildings that you don't see bullet marks of that time. And you're talking 50, 60 years. Budapest was in rubble. And going outside, sometimes you had to bring water, the men would go out and bring water from somewhere --

>> Bill Benson: So they would risk all of that, the artillery fire to get some water.

>> Susan Darvas: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: And speaking of risking going outside, earlier you said we were just on the other side of starvation. Now at this point starvation is very real. Food is almost non-existent. And you left the building.

>> Susan Darvas: Let's not --

>> Bill Benson: You should share that.

>> Susan Darvas: I was a kid. I don't know how far I understood. I mean, I understood we were in danger all of this, but, you know, you got tired of starving and not being able to do anything. At one point I could sneak out around my mother who had eagle eyes on me. Of course without the star. I knew where a nearby baker was. We had word that -- that night they were able to bake some bread. So I really wanted some bread. I wanted to bring it home. So I snuck out and there were long lines, of course. We were not supposed to be outside at that point. But I was lucky. I was dodging bullets. I had the privilege -- in 1956, but then I was an adult. So I was able to get some bread. It was a great accomplishment because none of us saw bread I think by that time for at least a month.

>> Bill Benson: You referred to bread was like diamonds. I think that's the phrase you used.

>> Susan Darvas: Oh, yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Bread was like diamonds.

>> Susan Darvas: It was more precious than diamonds. You can starve to death. And if you don't have diamonds, hey. So you don't have diamonds.

>> [Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: You also said that, you know, first the potatoes were gone. Then once the potatoes were gone, then there were some beans. And then the beans were gone.

>> Susan Darvas: Oh, potatoes, back in the Jewish house. Then, of course, the potatoes were gone. And then there were the beans. Because high protein, right? Not very nice diet. I hate beans. But at least it kept you alive. Then it was lentils. To this day I cannot look at lentils. I know they are very healthy. And then the lentils were gone. And then it was really, really

starvation. And then water was gone.

So even that, it was hard. I mean, people went so far -- ok so when you went outside, by that time nobody went outside unless they absolutely had to. There were dead bodies and dead horses lying around. And I remember once somebody brought home a piece of horse meat. I remember that because I was given a piece and forced to taste it. I can tell you, even though -- maybe because it was rotten or something, I don't know. But it had this kind of sweet, yucky awful taste. So anyhow, I didn't eat the horse meat. But I'm still here.

>> Bill Benson: After the Russians entered the city, of course there was fierce street, hand-to-hand fighting in the streets and then suddenly liberation. But tell us what happened as you were on the verge of liberation.

>> Susan Darvas: Well, this is what I remember. I mentioned you how crowded it was in the building. And most people, because of this constant fighting and bombardment and constant danger, piled up in the cellar, those who could fit in. But the conditions in the cellar [Indiscernible]. Not only was it dark and cold but people are crying. They were sick. Some of them died. And we were still there.

>> Bill Benson: The hygiene.

>> Susan Darvas: All of that. So I couldn't tolerate that. And I wasn't alone. My father was the same way. And my family members. So I figured that being hit by gunfire or a bomb was preferable to being stuck down there.

So we were up on the second floor apartment when we heard this loud cheering from the adjacent apartment building. Trust me, you didn't hear too much laughter in those days. So that was something extremely unusual. And certainly not cheering. And then the world was proud that the Germans are gone, the Nazis were gone, and the Russians are here. They saved our lives. I shouldn't say anything bad.. But the Constitution of the Army that came to liberate us was very -- ok, we'll talk about that later.

The point, said we were liberated, actually survived, at least survived the Nazis. So we started jumping up and down, dancing, hugging each other. It didn't last long because suddenly everything went dark. There was a big bang. Kind of red thingies were crisscrossing the room. And it turned out that the fleeing soldier, I assume a Nazi soldier or Arrow Cross soldier, had grenaded into the house and it happened to land in the room.

I dove under the piano. I don't know how I knew to do that. Maybe I saw news reels, I don't know. I was unwounded but my father was severely wounded, my uncle and aunt was wounded. My grandfather wasn't. I thought it odd I was the youngest, he was the oldest, so the two of us escaped unscathed at least physically. So liberation turned into terror at least for a while.

>> Bill Benson: And your father was quite seriously hurt.

>> Susan Darvas: Oh, yeah. He was crippled for the rest of his life and we didn't know whether he would survive.

>> Bill Benson: In the little time I know we have left, I know there are several things you wanted to talk to us about. As you said to me, "We survived the Nazis but the war was continuing. What do we do next?" So what did you do next?

>> Susan Darvas: What could you do next? So eventually when the street fighting stopped completely, all of us kind of picked up whatever we had and tried to find a way to be.

One of my aunts -- one of my uncles married a wonderful Catholic girl who survived in her apartment, in their apartment. So she contacted us, came over, risking her life really, and said, you know, all of you come over. I mean half of the apartment is gone. It was literally

gone, sheared off by bombs but we still had enough room, certainly more room than you have here.

So we walked across town which was quite traumatic. Again, stepping over the dead and seeing everything that you saw was demolished, the city that you knew gone. The bridges all gone. But that's what we did. And started rebuilding. What do you do? What do people do now in Syria and elsewhere? They try to survive and to rebuild. Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: And after a while your father was able to get out of the hospital.

>> Susan Darvas: After a couple of months.

>> Bill Benson: And that's when you tried then to start to rebuild a life as best you could. Your father I think was able to get back his business a little bit.

>> Susan Darvas: Well -- yeah, I wouldn't say business. He started fixing teeth again. And he started making, I don't know, making teeth, too, again. And then over the next 10 years he built up his laboratory because there was great need for it.

>> Bill Benson: I wish we had another couple of hours for you to talk about what happened from that point forward. But if I can just summarize it because I want to get to a question of you. You lived under the Communists after the war. You found yourself in hot water with a Communist, had an effect on you. By 1956, that's when you escaped from Hungary. Tell us a little bit about your escape.

>> Susan Darvas: Ok. I'll be very brief. Time is up.

Many people left after the war who had relatives elsewhere in the world. But we didn't. We stayed. And for about four years, between 1945 and '49, there was hope that Hungary would be democratic, free country and life would be good. But in 1949, the Stalin regime took over. There was a government takeover. They followed [Indiscernible]. And then there was a second wave of persecution which didn't single out Jews; it singled out anybody who wasn't a Communist or was thinking freely or lived the way they wanted to live, and, you know, so things became very, very bad.

I hated it. I wanted to be free. I thought that's what we survived for. I was also somewhat persecuted not physically but thrown out of universities but from universities in the country even though I had a very high grade point average. I really had it. I did not want to bring up my children in that country anymore. As much as I loved it. Hungary actually, the culture is really, really wonderful.

So in 1956 when the revolution began, there was a window of opportunity, although perilous, and we escaped through the mountains. There were refugees, in a refugee camp in Austria. And eventually we wound up in England where I have cousins, the children of Uncle -- yeah. We were there for about two years. What an adventure. Starting from scratch, I mean, when we escaped, we escaped -- I can't say that we even had our clothes on because by the time you hiked for six or eight hours through wilderness, the foothills of the alps, you get kind of torn. So you don't have much. So the only thing we had was what the refugee organizations handed down. And we started from scratch.

So we arrived to the United States in 1958 where my husband then was an engineer, was over the quota. He we had a quota system -- you guy has a quota system then which was actually very strictly observed. But it was a sputnik area, so we were allowed to come to the states and the rest is history.

>> Bill Benson: If you don't mind, I just have to comment on the fact that you were banned for essentially life in Hungary from going to university and you came here and achieved so much academically. I just love that.

>> Susan Darvas: I tell you, the freedom to learn. Take advantage of it.

>> Bill Benson: We don't have time for questions today. There's just so much that we needed to hear from Susan. But when Susan is finished, I want you to stay with us because Susan will speak to us again very briefly. When she's done, we'd like to invite any of you who are interested or can, come up on the stage, right up here, meet Susan, shake her hand, get your picture taken with her or ask her a question. We absolutely welcome that.

I want to thank all of you for being with us. I remind you that we have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday through the middle of August. We hope you can come back. But if not, all of our programs are on the museum's YouTube page; so you can view all of our programs.

When I turn back to Susan, when she finishes, our photographer, Joel, is going to come up on stage and take a photograph of Susan with you as the background. So we want you to stay put for that great photograph that we're about to get.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word. So I'm going to turn back to Susan to close our program.

>> Susan Darvas: Well, I spoke enough. Let me thank you for listening to this, listening to my story. I feel honored by that. Finish with a quote from Anne Frank who you know didn't survive in the end. But she kept a diary. And I was deeply moved when I came upon this quote. And I'm going to not paraphrase it but read it to you. Being shut up in that attic and facing death and starvation all the time, this 14-year-old child. Maybe that's why I really identified with her so much, very close to my age, said:

"How wonderful it is that nobody need to wait for a single moment before starting to improve the world."

So please do. Please do.

Thank you.

>> [Applause]