

REALTIME FILE

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
FIRST PERSON ESTELLE LAUGHLIN
JULY 18, 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 Mrs. Estelle Laughlin, 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.

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

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

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. Estelle became a teacher in Montgomery County, Maryland, earned a Master's Degree and became a Reading Specialist. She retired in 1992. Her husband died in 2008.

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 Estelle notes. She has two great grandchildren. She moved six years ago from the Washington, D.C. area to Chicago to be close to family.

Estelle volunteers with the museum's Speakers Bureau. Since her 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 in the final

stages of finishing her second book, a work of fiction about the Warsaw Ghetto with a working title of "I forgot to tell you." Following our program today, Estelle will sign copies of *Transcending Darkness*.

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

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, thank you for joining us and being willing to be our First Person today.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Thank you for having me and thank you all for being here.

>> Bill Benson: And you have just so much to share with us in a short period so we will get started right away.

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

>> Estelle Laughlin: I was born in Warsaw, Poland. My parents were middle class people. Warsaw glows in my selective memory and golden radiance of lilac trees against open blue skies, rich sounds of good neighbors, kindness, and trust and love.

>> Bill Benson: From what I read in your book and from what you've told me, you were extremely close to your father. Tell us a little about him.

>> Estelle Laughlin: My father was a very special person. I think every father is he taught me steadiness. He taught me love. He taught me compassion. He taught me to -- that goodness always will be here. In fact, one of the favorite stories that he used to tell me was that there will always be among us -- it's actually a Jewish folk tale, that there will be always among us 36 righteous people. They are called [Speaking Non-English Language]. They don't know who they are and we don't know who they are. But they are always here among us to heal the world. And I believed him. And I still believe him. And they don't know who they are. It means that any one of us may be one of them.

>> Bill Benson: Your mother fled Russia from violence and anti-Semitism there. Tell us about your mother.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, the Jewish history -- Jewish people experienced a lot of suffering. Persecution is like a pathology that is repeated, a social pathology, like a flu that unfortunately flares up. And Jewish people were persecuted during the Inquisition. They were blamed for the plague. And my mother lived in Russia when she was a child and she was chased out of Russia and came to Poland. So for her, the persecution was a second experience only this time it was even more deadly than the previous ones.

>> Bill Benson: Nazi Germany invaded Poland September 1, 1939. Your city, Warsaw, was attacked that very day. What do you remember of that first day and of the siege of Warsaw that followed?

>> Estelle Laughlin: There was a great deal of apprehension and preparation because Poland was aware of the aggression of the Nazis. In fact, there were lots of alarms just in preparation so that we are ready to respond if the wars come. But when the wars came, it was a serene day. Sadly, there was a tremendous explosion and another one, two or three bombs were dropped in Warsaw on several buildings. And then the planes took off just as quickly and Poland was attacked without declaration of war. So we were caught by surprise. In this one second my life changed from being a child to carrying the burdens of life.

>> Bill Benson: In that moment.

>> Estelle Laughlin: In just one moment.

>> Bill Benson: Warsaw was under siege. It held out for a month following the German invasion of Poland.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: You wrote that after the German Army marched into Warsaw, as you just said, immediately my life changed beyond imagination. Tell us some of those changes that happened instantly.

>> Estelle Laughlin: So the Nazi forces swept through Poland in four weeks. Only Warsaw held out for four weeks. For four weeks bombs were raining on our heads. After four weeks of nights the most unbearable, the sky would light up with rockets and the city was just lit up like during the day and bombs were just raining on our heads. Warsaw was under siege for four weeks. We ran out of water, food. And finally the Nazis marched in. And immediately our lives changed beyond recognition. Our once peaceful streets were now patrolled by foreign soldiers. They shouted insults and snapped up in our homes and streets. They said the Jewish people were greedy yet they walked into our homes and helped themselves to whatever they wanted to. They isolated us in a tiny ghetto and built a thick wall around us.

They filled the ghetto with people from surrounding areas. Most people came on foot without a penny in their pockets, many without shoes on their feet. Most people died in the streets of cold and starvation and illness. People covered the bodies of dead children with posters saying "Our children must live." Children are the Holiest things.

Yet, in this inferno people found ways to hold on to their souls, to hold on to their values, to be as humane as we could. Immediately -- excuse me. Immediately the Jewish community organized itself in a center. Everyone who had a little bit more helped those who had less.

To own a book was an act of defiance. It was a capital crime punishable with death. Yet all over the ghetto there were libraries. My father had a stash of his favorite books by Shalom Aleichem and Shalom Asch. They were my favorite Yiddish authors nights when those blinded with covers to keep our existence secret in a small room illuminated by a carbide light. We had no electricity. My father would pull out his books and read to us and bring to life remote worlds. Guns hovering over our heads did not stop us from celebrating holidays. Pulled the window shades down and we celebrated.

We even had theaters. Imagine theaters when there was no bread. There was a very remarkable author and historian in the ghetto. His name was Haim Kaplan. And he said, "Isn't it strange that when it doesn't seem we need it at all, we need poetry more than we need bread." And it is true. The soul needs to be fed as the body does. I believe that our ability not to follow like sheep, our ability to think for ourselves, our ability to express ourselves is our Godliness. All over the ghetto, heroic, unemployed teachers met with children in cold rooms and caught them to hold on to their imaginations and trust in love.

>> Bill Benson: You -- once the ghetto was created, which was very soon after the siege was over, you lived in the Warsaw Ghetto for three years. How did you manage to eat? How did you manage to get by in the circumstances you're describing? What were those conditions like for you?

>> Estelle Laughlin: What's strange, you know, If you cannot survive on what is allowable, you find ways of living by what is forbidden. So there was a black market. Children no older than 6 or 8 years old were very active in the black market. They would remove bricks under the wall and crawl through like little mice and then go to the Christian side and buy onions and crawl back. If they were caught, they were shot. The wall was stained with blood. But if they weren't

caught, then the family would eat that night.

There were also big-time black marketeers where the gate would open and some food was smuggled through. And, of course, the Nazis and the guards would line their pockets with the money of the people who were struggling to survive to see another sun rise.

>> Bill Benson: I was really taken with so many things you wrote in your book and that you've told me. You wrote in your book, "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." Will you say more about that?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. Warsaw was an ancient city and was very densely populated so most people lived in apartment buildings. Every apartment building had a kitchen. And there was a committee to take care of those who were the most needy. Children helped with collecting. We helped with mixing, stirring, the pot for the hungry people. And we used to put on shows and collect money and then the money went to helping the needy ones and the sick ones and the people in the streets.

We were fortunate that our street remained in the ghetto. If you had a roof over your head, if you had a home, you had everything. Without it you, had nothing. You were in the street. And the vast majority was in the street.

As a matter of fact, we were allowed such a tiny area that on the average there were like 10 people per room. Some were less but on the average, so, yes. They made life very, very impossible.

>> Bill Benson: And, of course, then it got even worse. 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 prevent you from being taken and deported to the camps?

>> Estelle Laughlin: In July 1942, the month of my 13th birthday, things became even more gruesome. That was the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto deportations. We had no inkling that the deportations meant death. As a result, many destitute people went voluntarily and unknowingly to Umschlagplatz, the deportation place where they were loaded on the freight trains and swept out of our lives.

Many people hid. Now, where does one hide in an apartment building? We hid behind chairs. We hid under chairs. We hid in drawers we hid in cupboards. We hid on the beds between mattresses and box springs, anywhere that we could find a place to vanish from sight. My family, we hid in a secret room. We put a wardrobe to obscure the door and that's where we were hiding during the deportations.

The deportations took place with 20th Century know-how and Stone Age values between July 1942 and September 1942, a near two months, 99% of the children disappeared. I was among the 1% of children still alive.

Can you imagine a world without the sound of children, without the presence of grandmothers and grandfathers? Because they were first to disappear.

>> Bill Benson: In fact, you shared with me that at some point the Nazis actually decreed that all children under the age of 14 were useless.

>> Estelle Laughlin: And contraband, forbidden.

>> Bill Benson: Useless and forbidden. And here you were 13. What did that mean for you?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yeah, well, I had braids so my mother cut my hair and tried to comb my hair to look more adult. I was petrified. Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: And she would take those steps to make you look just a little bit older.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. Right.

>> Bill Benson: And still you ended up being less than 1% of the children.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Work permits for the adults were really important, to have a work permit to be a slave laborer.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Your father came very close to being deported if I remember right, when he tried to get work permits. I don't know if I have that right or not.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, towards the end of the deportations there were very few people left and so the Nazis designated three streets and they were called the sub-ghettos. Each sub-ghetto had a factory. And if you were among the very fortunate to find employment for gratis, non-paid, if you were used in the factories, to be productive, and they called useful and the other ones were useless and wild, another name. And my mother, my sister and I managed to obtain a permit to work in one of the factories in one of the sub-ghettos mending uniforms of Nazi soldiers.

>> Bill Benson: And if I remember right, your work permit had you at an older age in order to get it.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes, but I don't think at that point they really cared very much. They had already planned for me to be dead and so they didn't catch me at that point. They would catch me at another time.

But, there were also a number of people who did not find employment and who were not deported and they were called the wild ones and the wild ones were hiding.

Now, you have to imagine the ghetto as an abandoned, silent place. I remember sometimes going out of my apartment and walking down the courtyard and opening the gate. There was such silence. I hoped to hear the sound of a neighbor in our apartment building, four-story apartment building that was actually like a complex of four blocks around the courtyard. We were the only family. The silence crawled at you. It was palpable.

And my father was among the wild ones and the wild ones were making plans.

>> Bill Benson: And speaking of those plans, you were still in the ghetto when the remarkable uprising occurred, the Warsaw uprising and then the horrific obliteration of the ghetto that followed. Tell us what happened to you and your family during the uprising.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Ok. So during the deportations when the people were dashed away from us, we never heard from them. But a few people, maybe a handful, maybe as many as there are fingers on my hand, I don't know, a very small number, managed to come back under the cover of night to the ghetto and they told us about the horrendous train rides to a place called Treblinka where our people were gassed.

I cannot imagine how anyone who loves their wife, who loved their mothers, who loved their children can do such horrendous things. This is the reason why I'm sharing my painful story. And I believe that this is the reason why you are here because we have to be reminded that human beings are capable of horrendous cruelties. And in witnessing that, in hearing that, recognize the importance of love, the importance of brotherhood, the importance of my humanity is your humanity and your humanity is my humanity.

So at that point --

>> Bill Benson: The uprising.

>> Estelle Laughlin: The remainder of the people organized themselves into armed resistance. If I remember correctly, there were only like 750 of them. My father was a member of the

uprising, too. The fighters began to build bunkers. We moved from our second floor apartment to the ground floor and we also began to build a bunker in the basement. So there was a network of bunkers in various basements, in various buildings. The freedom fighters also dug tunnels to connect for navigation and a tunnel to be able to get to the Christian side and obtain arms from the Christian underground.

Events erupted with Nazi columns entering Warsaw, columns of Nazi soldiers, tanks and armored cars. The sky was black with bomber planes. We had, of course, a secret trap door to our basement which was the powder room floor. We lifted the trap door and walked down into the dismal basement, pulled the trap door down. I felt banished. The ceiling pressed down on me. The damp walls closed me in. The flickering of the carbide light was our substitute for the sun. The ticking of the clock was our only connection with the outside world that gave us a clue when morning was rising and night was setting.

And while we were in this isolation, fighting broke out, facing a 20th Century Army armed from head to toe, facing armored trucks, facing tanks, facing bomber planes was this band of freedom fighters poorly fed, poorly clad, poorly armed, poorly trained. They climbed out of the bunkers. [Indiscernible] were also very much used by the freedom fighters to navigate. They crawled out into the street, stepped on top of the rooftops in front of open windows and lobbed Molotov cocktails and whatever they had.

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

>> Bill Benson: Held out for a month, during that time. Of course, but the forces of the German Army were so superior that it was going to end. What happened to you?

>> Estelle Laughlin: At some point a grenade was thrown into our bunker and we couldn't hide anymore. And the barbarians were upon us. They pulled us out into the street and dragged us through the buildings, crumbling at our feet. Flames, bombs, buildings, people in congealed blood, tongues of flames were licking the sky and painting it another worldly color, iridescent towers of smoke. I want you to know we did not march like nameless people. We were not a swarm of people. We were people with names, with hopes, with wishes.

Sometimes children ask me how did I feel inside and I tell them no different than they, no different than my grandchildren. I, too, wanted to be able to take my friends and my family and the rising sun for granted as they did.

They marched us to Umschlagplatz deportation station, loaded us on to freight trains.

>> Bill Benson: And from there they took you to Majdanek and that's where, of course, you loved your beloved father. I know there aren't words to describe here what it was like in Majdanek and what happened to your father but tell us what you can about that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Majdanek was enclosed by an electrified barbed-wire fence. The electrified barbed-wire fence was the end of my horizon. Within sight was the crematorium, the chimney, the stench of smoke. It is amazing how much suffering a human being can endure and remain human and remain compassionate and remain loving. They marched us to the shower rooms, gave us soap. We knew what the shower rooms meant. I was sure, we were sure, that it was the end of us but, in fact, the water smelled of disinfectant and we were sure that this was gas but we then -- we weren't gassed, obviously.

My father was gassed in Majdanek. And, of course, men, women, and children were separated. There were hardly any children. I certainly did not pass as a child. The few children that were still in hiding and were rounded up were separated in a little isolation and they

yammered and cried. It was awful.

>> Bill Benson: And your father was separated from you almost immediately.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what happened to the photograph you had of your father.

>> Estelle Laughlin: I wanted to hold on to something of my father. I think more afraid of death was to be separated from my parents. So I had a photograph of my father and I hid it under the lining of my shoe. And Nazi soldiers stopped me and he said, "You are hiding something." And I said, "N, I'm not hiding anything." And he said, "Yes, you must be hiding something. If you give it to me, I won't shoot you." I thought, well, the photograph would be so meaningless to him. He had a face like my face. He looked as human as I did. Certainly he would understand that it's a treasure to me but meaningless to him. So I pulled out the photograph, sure -- this is my father's photo, it's all I have. And he snatched it.

Easy to lose one -- maybe not easy but -- it's important to remember that one can distance oneself so much from one's spirit, from one's soul from one's humanity.

>> Bill Benson: Once you realized that you weren't going to be killed at that point, what were you forced to do? Because you're still in Majdanek.

>> Estelle Laughlin: So we were kind of stored in the barracks until there was room in the gas chamber for us, for our parents. So while we were waiting our time to be gassed, they just made us work, useless work. Loading to wheel barrels, plant it in another place. It was just sadistic.

>> Bill Benson: And that would be dug up and moved again from another place.

While you were at Majdanek, you shared with me that your sister, Fredka, was actually giving up and pleading to be sent to the gas chambers. Will you say something about that?

>> Estelle Laughlin: I think that it was really very valiant of her. She did not want to live in such degradation. She said, ok, they are going to kill us, let them kill us. And my mother said, "Life is sacred. It is noble to fight to stay alive."

But I want to point out something else that I think I mentioned to you before. We were talking very briefly about how does one preserve one's soul, how does one survive with love and humanity and compassion such cruelty. You know, in Majdanek there was really no hope. We composed songs and poems. We didn't have pencils it was not for history to remember. All we had was words and our dignity.

I mentioned before because to me that is extremely important. You know, my eyes were on the crematorium. There was a gibbet and a gallow in the middle of the assembly field in Majdanek and yet we composed poetry. That was our way of holding on to our humanity. Our suffering made us more compassionate. We were very kind to one another. And I think that is important to remember, that your mind is always free. Nobody can read your mind, not even Nazis. And that is our humanity. And that is our dignity. And while our eyes were on the gibbet and -- our minds, we were remembering our humanity. We were remembering who we were. We knew that we were innocent. We knew that the people who were doing these horrendous things will have to live with it.

I think -- that was in a way, our escape or maybe our holding on, maybe our steadiness; yes, that there is goodness because we saw it once and, yes, there is goodness because we believe in it and, yes, there is humanity because it is in us.

>> Bill Benson: You would spend, I think, three months at Majdanek and then you, your mother, and your sister were then sent to several slave labor camps after that, including the

first of which was Skarzysko.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about Skarzysko.

>> Estelle Laughlin: So, it was -- we worked in an ammunition factory. There's a slight distinction between an extermination camp and a slave labor camp. An extermination camp was a killing factory and the slave labor camp you just worked yourself to death. The camp was too enclosed, isolated and enclosed, by an electrified barbed-wire fence. And life was very brutal. You know, we were so isolated. It was impossible for us to imagine that only a few rabbit hops away from us people were sailing on silver lake and children were sitting around dinner tables with families as families should. We had no idea if the Nazis were winning or the allies were winning.

>> Bill Benson: You just didn't know.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Before you got to Skarzysko, if I remember correctly, there was a really remarkable stroke of luck, I guess, when you got on the wrong train. Tell us about that.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, maybe -- maybe I'll share about how my sister -- my sister was beaten very badly by a Nazi, a woman, a --

>> Bill Benson: And this was in Majdanek?

>> Estelle Laughlin: In Majdanek. So the following morning when we were assembled to dig the dirt, she just couldn't move. So we hid her under the bunks. And some Nazis came into the camp. And whomever they found in the camp, they wrote their names down. So the assumption was -- and my sister's name was written down, too. So the assumption was that all of those whose names were written down were designated for the gas chamber. My mother, sister and I had a pack that if one of us would be gassed, all three of us would go. So the logical thing for my mother and me to do was to trade places with two other women who hoped to see another sun rise.

So the following morning, that was in Majdanek, my sister's name was called and she reported and the two other women's names were called and we reported. We went with the group absolutely, absolutely sure that we're going to the gas chamber but instead they loaded us on to trains and we went to Skarzysko where we worked in the ammunition factory.

>> Bill Benson: And it was at Skarzysko where the three of you, your mother, your sister and you, were referred to by your fellow inmates there as the three monkeys and that you considered making that the title of your first book. Why did they call you the three monkeys?

>> Estelle Laughlin: You have to recognize that we were covered by lice, lice and mange and we had scabs all over because lice, itch and you scratch, and the skin gets infected and we had no medication so he would pick lice off one another. And we were also -- we were like, as far as I know, in Majdanek my mother was the only mother in the entire camp and we were the only family of three that I am aware of so we were very fortunate. So we clung together.

>> Bill Benson: So the only mother with children.

>> Estelle Laughlin: And we clung together and were picking lice so they called us affectionately the three monkeys.

>> Bill Benson: And the others looked out for you, too, if I remember.

>> Estelle Laughlin: We looked out for one another. There was a great deal of camaraderie. Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: And then finally you were taken from Skarzysko --

>> Estelle Laughlin: To Czestochowa.

>> Bill Benson: To Czestochowa. And then you were liberated.

>> Estelle Laughlin: We then were transported to another camp, Czestochowa, also in Poland. And then a miracle. One day we hear airplanes and we hear bombs dropping. You know, dying by an allied bomb would be such a dignify death. And when the bombing would cease, pause for a while, we'd say, no, no, keep on dropping the bomb. And we were liberated.

Now, this was January 1945. That was from September 1939 till January 1945. We were liberated by the Russian Army. And Poland is very cold. The ground was covered with ice and snow. And all we wore was a loose cap and no underwear, no stockings, no scarves, wooden clogs. We were shuffling out.

The camp was surrounded by a no man's land. We shuffled out. We were listening. We heard soldiers. We heard tanks. We still couldn't trust. Maybe it's a ruse. We just couldn't believe. We heard the Russian voices, so we rushed towards them like one rushes to messiah. Oh, do you know how long we've been waiting for you? And they put up their hand and said, "Sorry. We have a war to fight." And they did because the war wasn't over until May. And they gave us a slab of bread. They looked at their watches and they said make sure that you find shelter before curfew. I don't know if I was more scared of being arrested for breaking curfew, being arrested again, or dying of cold and starvation. So we shuffled.

>> Bill Benson: Essentially they said you're liberated but you're on your own, we have to go.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. So in my book -- much more has been written about the Holocaust and much less about liberation. So a large part of my book is about liberation because while freedom is so -- it's texture. It's palpable. We were free. But we didn't have a penny in our pockets. We didn't have a home to come back to. We were stateless. There was no state no country to go to. There was still a grave deal of anti-semitism in Poland. We were nobodies except inside ourselves we were somebody. Everyone is a somebody. We wanted to be somebody. We wanted to have a country. We wanted to have a home. We wanted to be able to walk down the street and to be looked at with smiling and welcoming faces and not to be looked down upon.

>> Bill Benson: There's so much more I wish you could tell us and I know we won't have time for it. A couple of things I would like you share. One is that you did find lodging in a small room that was occupied by a Russian soldier. Tell us -- that was very significant.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. So we were wandering through Poland and homeless. My mother had -- we were so afraid that we'll be stuck in this bloody Europe. My mother had siblings in the United States. But we didn't have the addresses because everything was taken away. We didn't have money to buy scam stamps or even paper to write a letter. My mother had this idea that maybe we'll find a cousin in another town. So we hopped a freight train. We arrived in the streets -- we arrived in the train station and we are very isolated and very alone.

Now, there was a saying, a word [Speaking Non-English Language], it means of the people, a Hebrew word when we feel very isolated and we hope to find someone else who would not be hostile to us which would be one of us we would say [Speaking Non-English Language] and so we heard the word and so we responded. And with a group we went out of the train station. Night was falling. We were aware of curfew. A bunch of young kids with stones were throwing pebbles at us. We were so stranded. And they sent dogs on us. We were frightened of dogs because of the German Shepherds in the camps. We are frightened. Night is falling. And the stones are thrown at us.

Down the street a door opens and a woman comes out dressed in black, looking blacker than the black of night. She raises her hands. If anyone said what can I do, it's not my

fault, they did it, she raised her hands and she scared the kids away. She chased them away and shamed them and took us in. And then the following day we found shelter. There were a few Jewish Russian soldiers who opened -- one of the soldiers was a tailor. In the room that he was repairing the uniforms, he opened it to the Jewish refugees so we had just a spot on the floor and we felt that we were very fortunate.

>> Bill Benson: You felt safe.

>> Estelle Laughlin: So we wandered. We wandered through Poland. We wandered through Czechoslovakia. We wandered into western Germany in order to establish where the American forces were stationed in hope to establish contact with my mother's family in the United States.

And we finally came to the United States. My sister and I were still young. We arrived in New York and work the in the garment factory. We were finishers and button sewers. Then I with three years of formal education and some tutoring in the ghetto and my sister with maybe four or five years of education, formal education, she became a professor of comparative literature. She wrote a very important book. She collected poetry written during the ghettos and concentration camps in Yiddish and Polish and translated it.

My mother, my heroic, poetic mother who in front of the crematorium said to us the world has a conscience. We thought she was crazy. But she said to us, you'll see, if we'll be lucky to survive, you'll see that the German, the Nazis' children and the children's children for generations will be asking where was your conscience. And you know what? She was right. And so I am grateful for it.

I think that understanding is essential. I feel that we are all left with a legacy to understand how could a country, such literate, civilized country, follow such a crazy person?

>> Bill Benson: If I can take the liberty, we're going to hear from Estelle to close our program in a moment but if I can take the liberty of quoting something you wrote in your book, if I may do that.

Estelle wrote: "Our survival depended 99% on random luck and 1% on instinct and grit. Without the 1%, you were 100% dead."

I want to thank all of you for being with us. We will have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday until August 9. We'd love you to come back if you can. If not, all of our programs are available on the museum's YouTube page and we hope that you will watch some of the other *First Person* programs if you can.

Two things are going to happen when Estelle finishes. One, our photographer, Lolita, will come up on stage and take a photo of Estelle with you as the background. So we want you to stay put. That makes a very nice photo for Estelle to have.

And when e Estelle is finished, she's going to head upstairs and be available to sign copies of *Transcending Darkness*. Many, many of the things we couldn't hear today are described just brilliantly in her book.

It's our tradition in *First Person* that our First Person has the last word. So with that, I'm going to turn to Estelle to close today's program.

>> Estelle Laughlin: I thank you all so very much for being here. Speaking about my experiences is so very hard. And listening to it is very difficult because it generates such pain. Yet, we have to be reminded from time to time of the consequences to us and to society when we accommodate ourselves to tyrants, how it corrupts the conscience of a nation, what it does to love and what it does to trust.

I am so grateful to this museum because, you know, as long as Darfurs happen, as long as there are people who say that the Holocaust never happened, in some ways Auschwitz

and Majdanek is still with us. This museum is proof that history always remembers. And we must listen if civilization is to progress.

Will we have time for questions?

>> Bill Benson: I don't think we will today. I think we're at the end of our time.

>> [Applause]