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USHMM
FIRST PERSON - SAM PONCZAK
MARCH 11, 2019

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Welcome to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.
First Person
Sam Ponczak
April 11, 2019
>> 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. This is our twentieth year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mr. Sam Ponczak, whom you shall meet shortly.
This 2019 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 August 8th. The museum's website, at 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 on-line conversation: Never Stop Asking Why. The conversation aims to inspire individuals to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises. You can ask your question and tag the Museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and the hashtag #AskWhy.
Today's program will be livestreamed on the Museum's website meaning people will be joining the program online and watching with us today from across the country and around the world. We invite everyone to watch our First Person programs live on the Museum's website each Wednesday and Thursdays at 11:00 AM EST through June 6th. 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 will begin. Let me get to the slide here. We begin with the portrait of Sam Ponczak and his sister, Gisele taken in 1946. Sam was born in 1937 in Warsaw, the capitol of Poland. Sam's father Jacob was a tailor and his mother was a seamstress. Germany invaded Poland in 1936. When the war broke out, Sam's father escaped to the soviet Union. Sam and Sara remained in Poland. In the 1930's, they established a ghetto in Warsaw and decreed that all residents move. The building where Sam and his family lived was already in the ghetto. In 1946, Sam's family decided to escape the ghetto. Eventually Sam and his family were able to reliant with his father. Finally in 1944, they were sent to the town of Kherson in the Ukraine where his sister, Gisele was born. This portrait of the family was taken in 1946 after the family returned to Poland. Sam completed high school in Breslau, Poland. In 1957, the family left Poland for France, Argentina, and ultimately the United States where they settled in 1964. We close with this contemporary photo of Sam and his family.
Following Sam and his family's arrival in the U.S. in 1964, 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 will be April 29th. 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. In fact, I think he leaves for Poland in a couple of weeks.
Sam lives in Arlington, Virginia, just outside of Washington, D.C. His three children all live in the area. He has 8 grandchildren. Here today with Sam is his daughter Raquel and two of his grandsons, Jake and Harrison. also his granddaughter, Felicia. I would like to note it is Jake's birthday today. With that, I would like you to welcome our "First Person" Mr. Sam Ponczak. Sam, welcome.
Thank you for joining us Sam, and for your willingness to be our "First Person."s is we have a short time to cover a lot that has happened in your life. We are going to focus on the Holocaust.

The War began with Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939 when you were not yet two years old. Before we turn to the war years and the Holocaust and what it meant for you, let's begin with you telling us a bit about your family and your community before the war began?
>> Sam Ponczack: Sure. My parents were born in the eastern part of Poland. My father was in the town Wielun. They had 1,000 Jews and a few thousand people they moved to Warsaw when they were teenagers. Their education was rather meager. They had about four or five grades of Polish school. Their Polish was rather rudimentary. Later on when I grew up, I realized they spoke to each other in Yiddish. That's where my understanding of the language is, although I don't write or read it well. But I do understand it. It become important down the road. So they did meet in Warsaw. He a tailor and she a seamstress. And I came into this world about two years before World War II broke out.
>> Bill Benson: How large was your extended family?
>> Sam Ponczack: It was quite large. My mother had three brothers married with family and wives and kids. On my father's side, will were more brothers, but two of the brothers have moved from Poland to Argentina before the war started. The other three includes my father's brother and two whom I never met because they were victims of the war. One of my uncles died in a way that didn't happen in the way -- my father had escaped to the occupied part of Poland. They had a deal that they got to reunite either my father comes back or it was an exploration. Where is it safer? Warsaw was being bombed and people were dying daily. So that was the plan. And that was the same plan with my uncle also from Warsaw. Unfortunately what happened to them was that my cousin who still loves in New York, she's much older than I am, and my aunt, her mother, went just like myself and my mother. But they never connected in Russia. And my uncle was desperate in finding them. Couldn't find them. He returned to Poland, and that was the end of him. I don't know how he perished. They never connected. The other -- the oldest one was a fighter in World War I. He ended up marrying a German lady after World War I. We don't know whatever happened to him.
>> Bill Benson: He moved to Germany; right?
>> Sam Ponczack: Yes. He moved to Germany with his Jewish-German wife. The only thing I have is a friend of mine who visited Poland and visited the concentration comp that he caught my last name with his -- with somebody's first name. Just like the age is the same age he was supposed to be from 1880. Something like that. And he was listed among hundreds of people who on that day died from some pneumonia. That was the description in the camp of how the people died they all suddenly die of pneumonia. We know better. They didn't die of pneumonia.
>> Bill Benson: Sam, almost immediately after Germany invaded Poland, they attacked Warsaw. As you said, your parents had the plan. Your father fled to the Soviet Union, but your mother didn't.
>> Sam Ponczack: Yeah. My mother had an extensive family. She had three brothers all married with children and parents. She was reluctant to escape, by the way. My father was a leftist. He probably had the ability to move into Poland. The German's attacked, and the Soviets attacked from the east. It was part of the Hitler-Stalin attack. That's where my father escaped to see if it was safer. They didn't though what to do. The city was bombed. In one month of September in '39 about 20,000 people were

killed, because of bombing and many squares of the parks. The main government and Polish government escaped on the third day of the war. They showed up later on in England.
>> Bill Benson: Once where are father was in Russia, do you know if he was able to communicate with your mother at that time?
>> Sam Ponczack: I suspect. I don't know for sure. I was either too small or too dumb to ask the question whether he was alive. Late on it was too late. I do know there was part of the pact was a postal communication that they maintained between that Soviet-occupied and the German-occupied parts of the Poland. I suppose they exchanged mail. Maybe that was a reason for them meeting -- for us meeting.
>> Bill Benson: Sam, once the Germans were in control of Warsaw after all of the bombing and their attacks on it, they pretty quickly created a ghetto. Which is where you and your mom ended up. What do you know about what that was like for you and your family?
>> Sam Ponczack: I don't remember. I was two years old. My parents and my mother telling me soon after the Germans occupied Warsaw, which happened before the end of September, the Jews were being brought into the area. My mother had to wear the arm band to identify as a Jewish person. I didn't, because I was just a small toddler. It is important. It plays a part in how we escaped. I need to tell you, I'm one of the lucky ones that I survived. One out of ten people -- one out of ten Jews who survived. The other nine did not. So my mother --
>> Bill Benson: I think I understand that of all of the children that were in the Warsaw ghetto, less than 1% survived.
>> Sam Ponczack: That's true. That's true. Because that was -- well, eventually the ghetto was liquidated, which meant that all of the Jews were meant to be killed.
>> Bill Benson: Your mom made the extraordinary decision to try to escape.
>> Sam Ponczack: Well, we made it early on before the ghetto was completely surrounded. At that time Jews were not allowed to travel by train. Since she was the eastern part of Poland, she knew about the following. The river which separated the German forces from the Soviet forces, that river used to freeze up in the winter in some places. So when she made the decision to escape with me, she obviously was counting on getting down to the river and somehow crossed a boundary. You know, the war between the Soviets and the Russians was still a year later more or less. One day she packed what she could. She took me and carried me to the train station, disregarding the fact that Jews were not allowed to travel, she got into a wagon. As she came in, she tells me that's what I know. That there was a priest there. Polish priest who called her up and said please take off of the arm band and get yourself and the kid behind me. She tells me later that wherever the police were walking by asking for documents, he would tell them the woman and the kid are from my parish. To make a long story shot, I know this man saved my life, otherwise I wouldn't be talking to you. And my mother's life. Later on when I asked her -- later on when I grew up a little bit, did you know him? She said, no, she did not know. Did he take any money? We don't though who we owe our lives. That's the story. Somehow we made it to the river. Like I said I was too dumb and too small to worry about it and ask about it -- how we made it. She knew enough to get to the river. Yeah. She tells me that she waited for the night. When the night came, she just stepped on the ice and decided to walk across. The poor woman was slipping

and sliding. To me it was really funny. I started to laugh. I couldn't keep my mouth shut. She tells me she was worried that either the Germans or the Soviets will kill us, because they hear the noises. So to shut me up, she gave me pictures that she took with her of family pictures. So I shut my mouth. I was looking at them. By the time we ended up getting to the other side, she tells me all of the pictures were torn up. So I'm guilty. I'm guilty as charged.
>> Bill Benson: Once you made it to the river, Russia and Germany were allies. Do you know why the Russians wouldn't have simply sent you back to the other side?
>> Sam Ponczack: They -- I don't know why they didn't. My mother was telling me she remembers about dogs and soldiers. Obviously we were caught by the Soviet border patrol or whatever it is. No. They did send some people back. I think predominantly those who looked like they were religious Jews or because they didn't -- it was a communist regime. They didn't care for that kind of people. Why they didn't send me and my mother back, I don't know really know. I don't know exactly how they managed to connect my mother and I with my father. The only suspicious that I have was the Soviet Secret Service, the KGB was very sufficient. They knew where everybody was. The rest was history. I don't know how long I was there. I was just too small to remember. Again I was too dumb to ask when I could, because I didn't think about it. I was small.
>> Bill Benson: Sam, you shared with me one of where are earliest recollections was being at a camp where your father was a lumberjack. Can you tell us about that is this.
>> Sam Ponczack: Right apparently after we were reunited -- I don't know how long it took. Weeks or months. But I do know for a fact that we were sent by a train to Siberia. It is western Siberia, west of the Euro mountains and not far from the Arctic Circle. I have a copy that I found two years ago from Russian documents that list specifically the train number, the date, and the list of all of the people that were on that train that was sent to Siberia. There were, as far as I know four such trains from that region where we were. Where we were was Ukraine. The western parts of Russian. So from that region, we were sent. I have my name, my parents name, my birthday, et cetera. They knew who they were sending. Mostly Jews and Ukrainians sent up to the Autonomous Republic of Komi. That was already -- when I arrived to the first town, it was called Medzice. It was a camp listed during the czar's camp where they sent people to labor and work in the gulags. That was the first camp. That's where my tailor father become a lumberjack. He become a lumberjack because the only type of labor that could be done there was cutting trees, cutting branches, and send the trees down the river. I do remember my father up to his neck in the water. I remember him with other men literally by hand cutting the trees that was the only work they had there. There were no factories there. I don't know -- we spent at least probably half a year there because these are my earliest remembrances of my family, myself, and that camp, that labor camp. Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: From there you ended up at Syktyvkar.
>> Sam Ponczack: Yes. We were there and then they sent us to the north capitol of Syktyvkar. That's where my father and mother were both employed. He as a tailor and my mother as a seamstress. They both worked in factories that they made uniforms or clothes for the military. I presume that that was already when the car between the Soviets and Germany began.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your housing arraignment when you first arrived?

>> Sam Ponczack: For sometime I remember living in Europe. We lived with an elderly native woman. The neighbors tried coming from Mongolia. They spoke the native language, which I learned a few words. We lived there. Once we were in Syktyvkar, I remember some sort of an apartment. The system was not organized. My father used to take me to his factory some days or my father to her factory. I was hanging around while they were using the sewing machine to do work. Later on I was assigned to some sort of kindergarten, because there were more kids like myself that they needed to do something with. So I ended up in the kindergarten, I guess.
>> Bill Benson: While you were there, your mother gave birth to twins who died.
>> Sam Ponczack: Right. Yeah. That I remember. That's where my Syktyvkar was were my twin brothers were born. I remember seeing them. And then I remember seeing them when they were dead. So it didn't take too long, because they were too small. I don't know if they were a few months old or something like that. Something like that. I just learned they were dead. The topic never came up. Like I said, when I grew up, I was growing up as a child in Poland and communist Poland. I didn't think about asking things like that. My mother obviously wasn't interested in telling me. Not because I was not interested, because probably it was very painful. So I never found out why or how or what was the reason that they died. I presume, that's just my pure guess, that was there was no medical help. All of the doctors, I suppose, were in the front fighting the Germans. That was the main job of professionals in Russia.
>> Bill Benson: You've shared with me several different things about your life in that part of Siberia. One of the things you shared with me is you remember your mother bringing home an egg. That was a big deal.
>> Sam Ponczack: Yeah. That was a part of a funny story. She brought an egg. I said what was that? Apparently I had never seen an egg or something like that. I remember also there was -- because wherever they worked, they used to get coupons for food. So there was one coupon for an egg or two, I don't know.
>> Bill Benson: This is for rationing.
>> Sam Ponczack: Yeah. Rationing, I'm sorry. Rationing coupons. So the one time I remember she was telling me, Sam, you got sick, because you ate a whole chunk of butter that we had for a whole month. I did not know. It tasted good. So I ate it.
>> Bill Benson: You also told me -- this is amazing that while you were there for most of Siberia, you saw a lot of exotic animals.
>> Sam Ponczack: That's true. That's true. When the war began between the Soviets and the Germans, the beginning was rather sad for the Soviets. They were retreating across thousands of miles. Retreating east. And they were moving people and machines and whatever they could. Among other things, even the animals from the zoos, from the -- you know. So in that forsaken place of Siberia there, I saw an elephant. I didn't know what it was. I remember it. Where the heck is an elephant in Siberia? What was he doing? Apparently he was a lucky elephant. He was moving with the population and factories and whatever else would be moved east.
>> Bill Benson: Everything they could take east.
>> Sam Ponczack: Everything they could take. Among them there were still refugees and Jews and Pohls who were trying to escape from the war. They were just escaping east as far as they could go.

>> Bill Benson: In 1944, your family was taken from Siberia to Ukraine. Why was that? And what was life like?
>> Sam Ponczack: I was in the so-called kindergarten. That's the time that I become aware there was a war. It is not like I read papers -- there was a loudspeaker in the room by the ceiling. There was a serious voice coming out of it. It was constantly talking about the war and our brave soldiers beginning the brave soldiers who were retreating in orderly fashion. But I guess around 1942 and end of '42, the brave soldiers were advancing in the opposite direction. That must have been after the big battle which was the largest in Second World War. So that is my awareness of the war. I didn't realize what it meant, except that something was going on. Many, many years later I asked my father about those times. He told me that apparently in 1943 or beginning '44, sometime around that, the Soviet government actually offered the refugees Soviet citizenship for those who wanted to become. Very few become. I asked my father why didn't you become? Well, he was smart enough to know that if he would become, it we would become, we may not have the right to return to Poland, because once you are a citizen, you do what the government tells you. That's with communism. He wanted to go back to Poland to find out what happened to the families. He didn't know anything. There was no Internet, telephones, what have you. There was no newspapers that describe this thing. Obviously we didn't know and my parents didn't know what happened to their family. That was the reason why the Russians did is they moved families like us to Ukraine, because at that time Ukraine was already liberated. It was closer to Poland. So they just wanted to have all of the people as close to Poland as you could get. They eventually moved to Poland.
>> Bill Benson: Once you were in the town of Kherson, you shared with me you were amazed that your father was driving a combine and farm equipment.
>> Sam Ponczack: Right. Right.
>> Bill Benson: Was he was forced to do there?
>> Sam Ponczack: There was very little choice in labor. We were moved to Kherson which was in Ukraine and warmer than Siberia. One of the first jobs, because he was a man. Men learn how to drive. Now I wonder how the many that had never driven anything mechanically or even a bike was driving the huge machine. But he did. I remember it. Eventually we ended up closer to the town, Kherson, because that combine was from the town. The men were not far from the river. A couple of things about Kherson is one my sister was born when we were in Kherson. I got myself sick with malaria when we were had in Kherson. And in Kherson was the first time when I found out that I was a Jew. My father didn't go around telling me, Sam, you know you are a Jew. No. He was not a practicing, -- religious-practicing Jew. I found out not from him. As I walked to the farmers market, there was a quadriplegic man with no legs. He was pushing himself on a board with some wheels. I'm sure some of you know what I'm talking about. He pulled up next to me and just cursed us out. I don't want to repeat it. How the heck you Jews survive -- didn't Hitler finish you off? I was just taken back. I understood it was Russian. Nobody needed to translate it to me. I had the talk with my father. He said, Sam, yeah, we are Jews. We are not very much liked around me. That's a man who spit out his guts. That's how I found out I was a Jew. There was a similar incident where my father took me and it was a fall of 1945. It was after the war. The war has ended already. I become aware of it. It was a different time. I walked into

a room. I did not know where I was, but I saw a whole bunch of young men in military uniforms. They even had their arms next to them. They were sort of moving like that. I did not know what they were doing. They were chanting. What was very striking to me, I'll never forget it, they had tears in their eyes. I didn't expect it from young men, military men. They were the heros for a boy like me. And I remember the episode. I did not sit down with my father and discuss it then. Because I had -- I was a kid. I had other things on my mind. But many years later, very many years later, I remember I asked my father what was that episode? I described it for him just like I'm describing to you. So he tells me that was a makeshift synagogue. And the day we went, it was the day of Yom Kippur 1945. That was the day of atonement among the Jews. They prayed to God for forgiveness and all of that. I asked him why were the men crying? He said these were the Jewish boys from the Soviet army that just returned if Poland or Germany. They were coming back home to Russia somewhere. They decided to celebrate Yom Kippur. That's what I saw. That was another event that sticks in my -- excuse me -- my mind.
>> Bill Benson: Sam, you shared with me once you were allowed by the Russians to return to Poland, that was quite a journey. You traveled in cattle cars. Once you got there, your home become a gathering place, I think you said, for survivors.
>> Sam Ponczack: That's true.
>> Bill Benson: Will you tell us about that?
>> Sam Ponczack: In February of 1946, my family, including my sister, and had many other Jewish families from the area were put into a cattle car train to Poland. I think the trip took about two or three weeks. It was a long, slow trip. It was a bitter cold winter, I remember. We ended up stopping in a town. When we got out from the train, I saw -- I remember the name of the train station was Reichenbach. It was written in German yet from the distance of time, I understood what happened. I don't know how many of you know the geography after the war, but between Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt, they redrew the map of Poland. It was not like the map you saw earlier on. It was changed. It so happened that the deal was that the allies will take a piece of Germany, and the eastern part of Germany and give it to Poland, and they took eastern part of Poland and gave it to Russia. All of the Germans from this towns and the area were very encouraged to move on west. This was a ethnic cleansing in some sort of a form. And so essentially Poland received an area -- let's say like the State of Maryland or something of that size -- which was free of German population essentially. And largely undestroyed physically towns which were small towns. They didn't play a significant role. That was also the reason why we were moved there, because although I was from Warsaw, there was nowhere in Warsaw to live. Warsaw was basically obliterated. That's another story. They moved us into the eastern part of Germany. It become lower Silesia. Within a year or two, it become a very large assemblage of surviving Jews. Not by accident. But that's a different story. It become a largest concentration, I would say of Jews in Poland right after the war. The things that I remember is that there were lots of Jewish people. We were a family in the sense there was a mother, father, and two children.
>> Bill Benson: You were in tact.
>> Sam Ponczack: We were in tact. Right. Typically it was a single man or single woman, some orphan children, and maybe an elderly man or woman. Families where a rarity. I'm not saying we were the only ones, but they were rare. Most of the people

were either -- most of the survivors were the ones that survived like we did in Soviet Russia. That came back. But many were from the camps, from those who were hiding in the forest, or survived the ghettos, or the concentration camps. The -- because we were like a family, people who were single not by their choice, but by the fate, my mother was very hospitable woman. People would come in and spend lunch on weekends or some holiday, what have you, and you know they would eat whatever my mother would cook up. And tearful conversations. I understood them because they spoke Yiddish. Most of them were not educated, you know. I mean they spoke rudimentary Polish. But not quite well. They preferred Yiddish. Now I -- I understood Yiddish because all of my life, even as a grown up, my parents between themselves spoke Yiddish. So I understood. Invariably, the topic was how did you survive? Did you meet such and such? What do you know about, you know, these are the typical questions that were being asked around. And when I think about it, -- well, it is sort of goes with that. I'll just repeat one episode. That was somebody by the name Mendel Pastornak that survived Auschwitz -- I'm probably going ahead of you.
>> Bill Benson: No, no. Go ahead.
>> Sam Ponczack: Why I'm talking about him is something I remembered well. He was a young man. He survived Auschwitz. He was telling what he saw in Auschwitz. I remember him talking about was when the next group of Jews were being lead to their doom to the gas chambers and the group stood behind some other barbed wires. He tells -- not me -- my parents and whoever was listening that the people that were lead to the death they knew they are seeing last day. They were yelling to the other people remember tell what you saw. Remember us. Tell what you saw. And that stuck in my mind. Why I'm talking about this, because after I retired and I started working here, I worked for a while as a translator. The things that I translated were not on the documents, but also audio/video type of things. There's a whole series of video disks that are cops -- that are disks that were made from interviews that were conducted in 1980's and 1990's in Poland with a group of people, who the Polish people who were the age of you guys. High school kids, a little younger, a little older. And, of course, in 1980s and 1990s, there were people in their 80s or 90s. The interviewed were conducted with them. The interviewer -- it was a personal who spoke Polish, but with the Israeli accent. They were apparently Jews from Poland that moved to Israel. They were used in the interviewers in the series of tapes. So in that one tape that I was translating, the person that was interviewed -- he was in his mid or late 80s describes that when he was a kid right after the war, in other words right after the war began in Poland, he remembers with a bunch of other kids, boys, sitting on the side of the road or standing and seeing a colony of Jews being lead into the forest to their execution. Being lead by the German soldiers. And of course the boys they knew, because they were executions going on there. They used to dig up the graves beforehand and kill the people he says the people in the column saw the kids and they yelled to them pray to Jesus, pray to God, pray to save us. Tell people what's happening to us. That's when I remembered that the talk by the man who comes to my parents apartment in the town and tells about Auschwitz. That's when I remembered him. Because I never thought about this. You know, you try to put certain things out of your mind. But somehow it sits this. So, you know, that become my motto. Do not forget. Because wishes of the people who are being lead to death to meet -- sorry -- are most important.

>> Bill Benson: Sam, you lived in Poland for a number of years. You describe that time for you before you were able to leave Poland, you were living in Breslau as a really important, formative time for you in your life.
>> Sam Ponczack: That's true.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about that in the little time that we have left, and how you were able to leave to Argentina and then the U.S.?
>> Sam Ponczack: I'll try to make it short. We were living in the town and they decided to settle into a nearby town called Breslau. There I went to high school. That's where my very good years. My happiest years, because I was growing up. I learned things and, you know, this was the good years. I fell in love. I had good friends. I had Jewish friends, Polish friends, in 1956, between the end of the war and now, Jews were leaving Poland in mass. The first one was after the war. The second one was after a year after the war there was a program where about 40 some Jews and men, women, and children were killed. It was a blood libel. You name it. Lots of Jews were afraid. They left Poland. We stayed. Then in 1956-57 there was another anti-semitic incitement. I need to tell you in those years I was in high school in Poland. Nobody talked about the Jewish catastrophe of Holocaust. It was always that Polish citizens were murdered by Germans. You don't feel comfortable. You know what happened. You know who you are. But somehow the politics don't touch you or talk about it. There was another anti-semitic outbreak. I don't want to go into details why, but that was the time that we decided to leave. And, of course, we -- that was about some 50,000 Jewish families and people decided to leave Poland. And the destiny was Israel. Go through Israel. When we packed up whatever we could and we were ready to leave and we started to get letters from Israel from people who went earlier. Do not come. Do not come. And the rational was the climate and situation in Israel was difficult. My mother was a sickly woman. They said don't come, because Sally, my mother's name, will not survive the climate and conditions. Israel was a very young country. So we decided to not go to Israel and take our chance of so-called go to Israel via France. So we were able to get the transit VISA to France. The idea was to get yourself to Paris, jump off of the train, and try to get settled in France. And essentially that's what happened. But the passport, which I still have it today, was such that it lost validity after 90 days. After 90 days, I become stateless. Just like my parents. I was a stateless -- I don't know, immigrant or whatever. So that's the situation. We lived in Paris for two years. And I was out of high school and didn't know the language. I had to learn. And ended up becoming an apprentice tailor, because in -- luckily, I got the job. Somebody illegally -- somebody else knew gave me a job, my father a job, my mother a job. The three of us worked. We lived in one room, slept this one bed. And anyhow eventually -- and we were given documents that were extended for another few months by the police eventually we got arrested. This time they said you've got to leave. You know, we will not play any more games. We don't care where you go. To make a long story shorter, I was able -- at that time I was 20 something. I was able to, you know, I was becoming a spokesman for the family, because I did speak French and I could communicate, blah blah blah and so on. Anyhow I was able to get a VISA to Argentina. The only reason -- the reason we went to Argentina was because of my uncle who was there since the depression, since the time of depression. And he was able to send us money for the

family to take a ship to two to Argentina. Because we didn't have even the money to leave France. But eventually we ended up going to Argentina.
>> Bill Benson: You were there for five and a half years.
>> Sam Ponczack: We were there five and a half years. Thanks to that, I learned Spanish too. I become a salesman for the establishment of my mother and father who used to sew things. I would sell and help them buy. I become a bookkeeper and what have you. At some point in time, I always wanted to go to a university and become an engineer. Well, all of this ended up in fiasco. But the admission officer at the University of Cyrus declared the paper my diploma was on was Poland was for the dogs or whatever. Besides that, I didn't know the history. My Spanish was not good. He declared it was very bad. I saw everything was closed for me. Again I worked about a year very hard. I worked with one of the sailors, a Jewish fellow who helped me obtain a contract to work for my father. A contract to work in America for my father because a buddy of his, a Mr. Hamburger, I don't know if anybody is old enough to remember the Hamburger stores in Baltimore. Hamburger used to own a string of stores. He help me and eventually we got the immigration VISA for my parents and my sister. I, unfortunately, couldn't come on that immigration VISA, because I was too old. That's another law. So I ended up coming as a foreign student to the United States. We ended up coming to Baltimore. My parents -- my father worked in Hamburgers, my mother worked in the store -- and they accepted my diploma from Poland at the University of Maryland.
>> Bill Benson: Unfortunate we are out of time. We didn't have time to ask questions. We're going to chose the program with Sam's comments. Afterwards, I invite you to come up and ask your question, shake his hand, take a photograph with him, and just say hi. We absolutely welcome that. It was really clear that Sam was only able to touch on just a few of the details. I wish we had all afternoon. But we don't. I want to thank all of you for being with us today. Remember you that we have "First Person" programs every Wednesday until August 8th. Our programs will be live streamed. All will be on the YouTube channel. If you can't come back and be with us in person, see some of our other programs. Sam's will be up on the YouTube channel. It is our tradition that the first person gets the last word. I would like to turn to Sam to close the program and invite you to come up and chat with Sam afterwards, if I would like.
>> Sam Ponczack: I always think what is really the message that I want to convey to you. And I'll try to make it short, because time is short. One is history. It is very important to know history. And I'm very saddened to see the evidence that it is being ignored in education. And a simple example was that -- you all, I'm sure, have seen the picture of 1945 time square in New York. May 8th or 9th, I don't remember, and the famous sailor kissing the girl. About two million New Yorkers and what have you going crazy; right? You've seen that. Two years ago I went to the World War II memorial on the mall in here. There was hardly a person there. It was the native marching day. They walked around with the stand. In about 70 years, not only that, but I was trying to find anything in the "Washington Post." There was -- I couldn't find anything about World War II. Nevermind Holocaust. That tells me a lot. It tells me that history is either ignored willingly or unwillingly, I don't know. It just saddens me. That's why I'm appealing to any of you who has a say in the power, keep teaching history. If not, if it repeats itself, it is not a good thing. The other thing that I would like to do is quote a

philosopher and a historian in Israel called Ihudabauer. He proposed that we feed to add three more commandments. I like to do that especially when I see a younger crowd in the audience, high school, middle school, what have you. I hope you don't mind. But he proposed the 11th amendment "Thou shall not be a victim."
He had in mind the Holocaust and so on. The 12th commandment "Not be a victimizer." But the most important one, the 13th, he said "Do not ignore it. Don't look away. Don't pretend you don't see it. Do something. React." I'm just saying this especially to the younger kids talking about bullying and things that you see in schools. Or in daily life. Because hatred, anti-Semitism, is becoming unfortunately more prevalent. I hate to see that. I hate to confuse that word. I hate to see that. I would like to just leave you with these thoughts. Thank you.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you.
(Applause)