

Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person  
Rose-Helene Spreiregen  
Wednesday, April 24, 2019  
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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. This is our 20th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Rose-Helene Spreiregen, 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](http://www.ushmm.org), provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

Rose-Helene will share 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 Rose-Helene 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 a.m. Eastern Standard Time through the end of May. 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 Rose-Helene is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction. We begin with this photo of a 4-year-old Rose-Helene Bester, now Spreiregen.

Rose-Helene was born March 6, 1931, in Paris, France. Rose-Helene was raised by her mother, Rivka, and her grandmother, Sarah. Sarah is pictured here on the left with

Rivka on the right. Both had immigrated to France from Warsaw, Poland, in the late 1920's. Due to family hardships, Rose-Helene was sent to a Jewish boarding school when she was just 5 years old. Shortly before World War II began with the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, Rose-Helene returned home to Paris. In May 1940, Germany invaded France. Later that same year, anti-Semitic legislation was instituted in France severely limiting the rights of Jews and requiring them to register and wear a yellow Star of David at all times. Fearing deportation to a concentration camp in the summer of 1942, Rivka fled to unoccupied Vichy, France, leaving Rose-Helene with Sarah in Paris. Unbeknownst to Sarah and Rose-Helene, Rivka was arrested at the demarcation line between the German occupied and the unoccupied zones of France, illustrated in white on this map. This photo of Rivka was taken for her false identification papers when she tried to flee to Vichy, France. Taken in July 1942, this is the last photograph of her before she was taken to the Drancy internment camp, then transported to Auschwitz where she was murdered.

Sarah and Rose-Helene stayed in Paris until rumors of another wave of roundups prompted them to flee. They made it to Voiron, France, in the unoccupied zone where Rose-Helene, at just age 12, worked to support her and her grandmother. Here we see Rose-Helene on the right. The woman on the left was a friendly neighbor who lent household goods to help Rose-Helene and her grandmother.

In August 1944, the Allies liberated Voiron. Following liberation, Rose-Helene enrolled in school, graduated, and obtained a job in a French banking and investment firm, where she became an expert in gold coin authentication. In 1961, Rose-Helene married an American, Paul Spreiregen. Here we see them at their wedding in Paris. While on a visit to the United States in early 1961, Rose-Helene was introduced by a mutual friend to Paul Spreiregen. Several months later they married on October 22nd in Paris, and Rose-Helene moved to Washington, D.C., to begin her new life in the U.S.

She and Paul have been married nearly 58 years. Rose-Helene worked with her husband in his architectural practice which he continues to this day. Among Paul's many works, he was the architect for Maryland's Vietnam Veterans Memorial and a professional adviser for the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial Design Competition. He is also an author and teacher and for 12 years hosted the program Places for People on National Public Radio.

Although Rose-Helene began visiting this Museum when it opened in 1993, she recently became a volunteer at the Museum in 2018. You will find Rose-Helene at the Donor's Desk on Thursday afternoons. Rose-Helene enjoys gardening, and together she and Paul enjoy museums, concerts and travel. Until recently they skied and played tennis together. And they both continue to stay in shape by swimming almost every day. This is Rose-Helene's first time with us at First Person. She is accompanied today by her husband, Paul. In the front row. And surrounding them are a number of friends, including members of the family of Ellen and David Epstein, whom Rose-Helene introduced to each other 48 years ago, and a number of their family members are here. And also with them is their friend Didi Kaufman, whose father and uncles fought to liberate Europe in World War II. With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Rose-Helene Spreiregen.

Rose-Helene, thank you for joining us, for your willingness to do this for your very first of what we hope will be many, many times. But we'll focus on today. You have so much to

share with us, and we have so little time. I know we won't cover everything, but we'll cover as much as we can. Is that better? OK.

Your mother and grandmother immigrated to France from Poland in the late 1920s. Your mother married in the late '20s, probably 1929. You were born in March 1931. Your parents divorced when you were an infant. For the first several years of your life you alternated between living with your mother and grandmother, and for a period in a foster home. Tell us what you can about your family in those early years of your life.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: The first few years of my life were not very easy. It was very difficult, in fact, because it was the depression. It was very hard for my family. We're new immigrants in France and needed to find work. So the problem was I was very often bounced from my grandmother's place to my mother's and also some foster places for, I don't know.

>> Bill Benson: When your mother and grandmother moved from Poland, were there other family members living in Paris at that time?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Yes. There were other members. And the two sisters of my grandmother, and their husbands, and the children, were in Paris. They came before. They came probably mid '20s. My uncle, the son of my grandmother, and the brother of my mother, came maybe in '27 or so. He was sent to Paris by his mother because he was about to be enlisted in the army for seven years. So that's what I think would make you move, especially if you were a Jew.

So my grandmother managed to get him to Paris where her two sisters were already there with family. So they, my mother, and grandmother came later, probably in '28 or so. I am not absolutely certain.

>> Bill Benson: You said it was the depression. How did your mother support you at that time?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: It was extremely hard because she was trying to find work as a dressmaker, doing whatever she could. And this is why I couldn't stay with them because you could not have a child. No one was helping you. So I had to be either with my grandmother or be in a foster home. But that was --

>> Bill Benson: At age 5, when you were 5, you were sent to a Jewish boarding school. And you were there on and off until the summer of 1939, just before Germany invaded Poland in September of 1939. So for about three years. Tell us what it was like for you during that period of time when you were at the boarding school.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: It was again a difficult time because I was sent to this Jewish boarding school. We had friends who had other children there, and they were good friends. So that's how we knew about it. And it was in the west suburb of Paris. Not very far. Maybe 25 kilometers from Paris. And I was there -- it was lonesome because other people had siblings. I did not. Other people had parents who would come visit on Sunday. My mother or grandmother came seldom because it was very difficult for them to come. It was expensive. And also sometimes they had to work.

So what was -- I think what I did is I worked very hard. We were going to school in town, not at the Jewish boarding school. And I worked extremely hard. I was a very, very good student. I got actually the last year I got three first prizes at the graduation. I forget what they were. Plus I got a prize which was my really prized possession. It was -- I'm trying to remember what it was called.

>> Bill Benson: The prize of excellency.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Yes, right. And it was a beautiful book, gilded, and it was something really wonderful. But also what happened is during the time I was in this boarding school was a difficult time as well because -- and it's sad because I was by myself. And I was young. So what happened is I -- on Sundays parents used to come to visit. And I didn't have visitors, obviously very seldom. And there was -- in the kitchen they usually asked for volunteers to help with doing dishes. And of course there were not too many takers on Sunday because their parents would come. But I was very interested in going, so I would go to the kitchen, except they didn't want to get children who were under 6. At that point I was 5 1/2.

So what happened is one day my mother came finally, in this beautiful park, she walked in and someone got me out to see her. It was so wonderful. And instead of jumping up and down with joy, the first thing I said to her is, if anyone asks you, please tell them I'm 6. How old am I exactly? And she said you're 5 1/2. Don't say that. I'm 6.

[ Laughter ]

>> Bill Benson: Rose-Helene, you had said that your mother and grandmother couldn't come and visit you very often, but your mother was there when you got those awards.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Well, this was the last graduation in July of '39. And as I said, I got -- she came for that because it was very important. And it was -- I got these prizes. And I got this book. It was the prize of excellency. So she was extremely proud, telling all the people, that's my daughter on the stage. But that was my prized possession, which I'll tell you later what happened to it.

>> Bill Benson: The full impact on France of the start of World War II didn't come until May 1940 when Germany invaded France and other nearby countries. But you and your family were affected almost immediately when Germany invaded Poland September 1, 1939. You were evacuated out of Paris. Tell us what happened to you, your mother, and your grandmother at that time.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: September '39, we -- I think they were afraid there would be bombings, and they decided to evacuate elderly people and children. So my grandmother and I and also my little cousin, who was the son of my uncle, the two of us, went with my grandmother and we were evacuated to a place called Savigny-sur-Braye. And we were there. We went to school there. It was a normal kind of thing, but we were away. We were away from Paris. Of course there was no communication, no telephone or anything like that. So the family didn't know what was happening to my grandmother and the two children.

So eventually my -- in May of 1940, when the Germans started to invade the northern countries, they started actually with Belgium. And there was a huge amount of people crossing our village because they were fleeing. And then we had to give them whatever we had, a little water, a little bread, or something. And they were going south. They were just terrified. Then it happened, people coming from Paris as well, from France, northern France.

My mother had decided to come and visit us. And it just so happened that there was a bombing, and she got shrapnel in her foot. So she had to take -- to get to a doctor right away. Most of the doctors had fled. There was really nothing. So we had to get back to Paris as soon as possible. The problem with that was it was really getting totally chaotic because you had these huge crowds coming from the north, coming down from Paris and from other places. And they came on foot, on bicycle. And then you had the other

ones trying to get back to Paris, which was the case for my grandmother and myself. And it was really a chaotic way because you may have seen films where you saw the huge crowds and horses with wagons and cars, which didn't have gasoline anymore, which were loaded with things, which were stuck. Plus as we're trying to get back there was as well bombings. The British and the Germans were bombing. So all of these huge crowds on the roads. We had to often jump into ditches while this was going on with all the fighting. The airplanes. This was so scary.

>> Bill Benson: The planes were strafing you.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: They were bombing each other, but the crowds -- there was a huge crowd going one direction and another crowd going the other direction. No one really knew where they were going. We were going back to Paris.

>> Bill Benson: Somehow you made it back to Paris.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: We made it. Eventually we made it. I don't remember how, but we made it. So we went back to Paris. And eventually my grandmother and cousin came back.

>> Bill Benson: When you got back to Paris, once you were back there, the Germans were already in control of Paris.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: They were already in Paris.

>> Bill Benson: And they immediately began imposing severe restrictions on Jews. Tell us some of what those restrictions were.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: The restrictions were first of all Jews had to register at the police station. This was the first thing people had to do. Jews had to go back and register. You could of course not do it, but then anything could happen. And then the laws started to be very severe. Jews couldn't go to any parks. They couldn't go to a restaurant. They couldn't go to museums. They couldn't go to theater. They couldn't do -- they couldn't have a telephone. There were so many restrictions.

There was a curfew. I think it was 6:00 p.m. You couldn't get out. And this is when it started. In '41 we -- the Jews had to start to wear yellow stars on your garment which said Jew. The stars, we were all issued three of these stars. And anyone who was more than 6 years old had to wear one.

So it meant you couldn't actually pin them on. You had to sew them up. And if you needed to -- if I had one here and I needed to wash my garment, I had to unsew it and re sew it. It couldn't be pinned on. It had to be sewn up.

>> Bill Benson: And you remember doing that yourself, right?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Yeah. Of course I remember. And I remember trying to go in front of these wonderful little parks which said, no dogs, no Jews. It makes you feel like nothing much when you're a young child and you cannot do any of these things. You are excluded from things. This of course -- the minute we started to wear the yellow star, things got even more difficult because some people were pretty nasty and started to call you names like dirty Jew and also the equivalent I think of dirty Kike, which was really so demeaning and so scary as well.

>> Bill Benson: When you went back to Paris, for a while you were able to go to school. When did --

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: I went to school.

>> Bill Benson: When did that come to an end? When did schooling come to an end?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: I stopped going to school in July '42.

>> Bill Benson: July '42.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Yes. It was the end of the school year. Because children who were in school, who had the Stars of David, they often were picked up and were deported. But this really started more seriously after there was this round-up.

>> Bill Benson: And this was July of 1942.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: July 16 and 17, 1942. There was a round-up of all of the foreign Jews in Paris, whether they were chosen or elder people or adults. Everyone was taken. So it was no discrimination, except the French Jews were not deported yet. Their time came later. A friendly policeman warned my mother that she should leave the place because there was going to be this big round-up. So she left. And they came for her, and she wasn't there which meant that she couldn't go back, that she had to find a way to get to the free zone as soon as she could, which meant that she had to get French papers made.

So she had a few friends who were in the same predicament, and there was a small group, and they managed to get false papers and they managed to get someone to take them to cross to the free zone. The problem was that this person betrayed them, and they were arrested. And my mother was arrested. And sent to Drancy, where a few days later she was deported to Auschwitz.

And the way I knew -- I learned much later that she would not come back, is that they asked for volunteers when people were deported from Drancy, which was the holding camp near Paris, they would send adults to be deported but the children were left behind in the camp to fend for themselves. And then when they had enough children, they would gather a whole train of children and ask the people who were in the camp to volunteer. So my mother volunteered for one of these children's transports.

And unfortunately I learned after that anyone who was a volunteer with the children when they didn't die on arrival after several days in a closed train car without water, without food, was gassed on arrival. So she had no chance.

>> Bill Benson: At that time, Rose-Helene, you learned that she had been deported but you didn't know what had happened to her at that time.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: We learned about this fact because we had some friends living in the same building. She had been -- the woman had been at Drancy. Eventually she was so terribly sick with tuberculosis that they sent her back. But she saw my mother, and she saw that she volunteered. And she saw that she was in the wagon with children. So that's how we learned.

>> Bill Benson: When your mom -- when she left for Vichy, her intent was to then send for you and your grandmother. But with her gone, you then stayed in Paris for the next year under very severe circumstances. And if I remember right from what you told me, your mother -- your grandmother did not leave your apartment for a year.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Yes. We moved to my mother's apartment because we felt since my mother had been arrested no one would come again to try to get it. Besides we bribed the concierge to say if anyone came that there was no one in the apartment because the person was already deported. So my grandmother was there for about a year until August '43. And I was in charge of doing what needed to be done.

>> Bill Benson: Like getting food.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Like getting food. We had ration coupons. And at first not much. But you had to stand in line for anything. And sometimes by the time you got there, there was really nothing left.

I also have to mention that not only did we have a curfew at 6:00 p.m. also we were only permitted to shop between 11:00 and 12:00. So sometimes you were in line for longer, and therefore we didn't manage to get very much. And this was all the ration tickets. But there was some other food that we could get, like that was free of tickets. I could get rutabagas, which was fed to the cattle, but we were happy to have that because we had nothing. So we would make soup with that. I believe you could get onions free -- not free, I mean you paid for it, but --

>> Bill Benson: Without ration cards.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Without ration coupons. And there was one thing that we also were able to do is we could get fish -- I mean, we didn't get fish -- the heads of fish were sometimes there and no matter what you did -- there could be 2,000 or 3,000 people. So every day you would have to go to the store and see how many people were going to be served like from 1,500 to 1,550. So you would be in line trying to get one of those fish heads. Of course a fish head is not very appetizing but when you have nothing to eat it was wonderful.

>> Bill Benson: So you're 11 years old, and you're outstanding in line dealing with all of that. You also shared with me that while you were in the apartment with your grandmother, you could hear German trucks coming up to different buildings. Will you say a little bit about that?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Yes. There were very, very few cars because gasoline was rationed and very few people had any car. In fact, the cars that I can remember were really German trucks. And they were coming around. And at night very often they would come. And we had -- the neighborhood, we knew quite a few families who were in hiding. And they would stop at a certain house, and we would listen. And once at the corner, up two streets, we could hear them and we could see those trucks would stop in front of a certain building. And we would say to each other, this is where the Goldbergs are hiding. And sure enough the Goldbergs were taken out. You could see them in the truck, and they were taken.

So there was total fear that they might come and not believe the concierge that there was no one in the apartment. And try to get up and get us too. Sometimes we heard all these rumors, so we would go and spend the night in the attic. There was an attic in this building. So we would be there, in the attic, with mice. And sometimes we would try to hide that way for the night.

>> Bill Benson: And you went on doing that for more than a year.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: A year later, after your mother had been arrested and deported, in August of 1943, your grandmother decided you needed to go to Vichy.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: My aunt and my cousin --

>> Bill Benson: Bernard?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: The wife of my -- sister-in-law of my mother and her nephew, her husband was already deported. Which is ironic because he had enlisted in the army. And he was in the army, which would have been terrific for him to stay but he got very sick so they sent him home. And had he stayed in the army he would have

been made prisoner, and he would have survived. But they sent him home, so he was arrested in '41 actually and deported in June of '42.

So my aunt and my cousin had already left. I don't remember when they left because we really couldn't communicate very much. No telephones. The only way to communicate was to go to the place where the person lived.

>> Bill Benson: And do that at great risk.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: So they left. And we couldn't write letters which would have been more personal. You could only write postcards. And because the postcards could be read. So it was very difficult to explain, to tell how can we join you. So my aunt would write maybe it's time for a vacation or something like that. So anyway, we decided it had become really, really too difficult to stay in Paris because every day something terrible happened.

So we found someone through some friends who made us false papers. False papers for my grandmother and a birth certificate for me since I was so young. There was a big problem with that too. My grandmother was Polish. Her French was not so wonderful. And all we spoke at home together was Yiddish. So here she had an I.D. card which was French. She had to learn where she was born near Lyon somewhere, and she had another name. And she was supposed to be French and speak French. So it was really a serious problem.

So anyway we managed to get the papers. We managed to get to the train and to arrange with my aunt to be there. But getting in the train and crossing was one of my greatest fears, I think. Really awful because we had to go to two --

>> Bill Benson: Two checkpoints. Two different checkpoints.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Two different checkpoints. Yes, the German when we left Paris, the German checkpoint, and then to the French checkpoint when we got to the free zone. And they would come -- and this was an overnight train. So I made arrangements with my grandmother. I decided at 12 years old I was in charge. I told her that it would be better if she slept, if she made believe she slept, and I would take care of the papers. And that's what happened.

So the German police came. And I was pretty shaken. I was really afraid. And I explained to the German policeman that this was my grandmother, and she was asleep, and please don't wake her up. I had the nerve to do that. How I don't know. But it worked. And then the next checkpoint was the French one. Same thing happened. It was -- I had to explain this again, although I was so terrified. But it was, I guess, a little girl and an old woman sleeping. OK. It worked. So we managed to get through, which was wonderful. But I think -- I was shaking so much after that. I was so terrified.

>> Bill Benson: Rose-Helene, when I met you and you told me about this, it became very clear that you had been through many, many very frightening experiences. But you said about that crossing, I was so shaken, I don't believe I have ever been more scared in my entire life than that particular time as a 12-year-old girl.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: I think it was about -- I don't think I was ever more scared.

>> Bill Benson: The burden was entirely on you. But you made it. So now you're in Vichy, France. Where did you go from there?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: We went to join my aunt, who was living in a place called Voiron. Thank you. Thank you. And -- but we couldn't stay with her because it was like a



hamlet where she was, and she was with her son. And there was another lady who was there whose husband also had been deported. And they were all hiding in this place. So we were worried. And we had to find another place to be somewhere else. Finding a place was not an easy thing at all.

And also we had to be careful not to be too suspicious because when we left, we left with two little suitcases, one each, not knowing if it was going to be for a month or for a year. And I guess we couldn't go with big suitcases. Besides we didn't have them. So we had to find another place.

And people were a little curious to know why we came from Paris. So we had to explain not that we were hiding from the Germans, but because they were bombing in Paris and we couldn't stay. So we were looking for a place. So I guess they accepted that. And we eventually found a place.

We found a place in Voiron which was about maybe four or five kilometers -- maybe 2 1/2 miles from where my aunt and my little cousin lived. And it was -- I'm not sure what you would call it, but it was a place which was -- it was where furniture had been stored for many years. It was a kind of storage --

>> Bill Benson: Like a storage shed basically?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Yes. But it wasn't a shed. It had two little rooms. Tiny little rooms, but it was there. It was in a building. And it had cold running water. And that was about it. It had nothing else. And it had a lot of mice because it hadn't been lived in for a long time.

So we had absolutely nothing. We needed something to cook. And we needed a stove. So we had to find -- my aunt knew some people, someone to lend us a stove, someone to lend us some cooking things and a bed. We didn't have a bed. We had nothing. So it was just a straw something on which we both slept.

And it was also -- once we got there, we had to start out bartering because also we had no money, very little money. So I had to find something -- I had to find something to do to make a little money. And my aunt knew the person at the little grocery, tiny grocery in the country. And they needed someone to help them because the husband was a prisoner of war. And this lady was very sick with tuberculosis. And she had a little girl. I don't know how I didn't catch it. But anyway, she needed someone to run this little grocery. And so I went and she hired me.

>> Bill Benson: Again, you're 12 years old.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: 12 years old. And I was in charge of running this little grocery, taking care of all of the coupons, all the ration tickets. And also trying to see what -- there was no fresh vegetables, but it was all of the other stuff. It was a very small grocery. And it was -- I had to go often to get all of the things back to the grocery store like a box of cookies or whatever it was. And of course I had no way of doing it. So the woman who hired me lent me her bicycle. Plus I was living like 12 miles away. So I had a bicycle to go get stuff back to the grocery store. And also to get back and forth to my home.

>> Bill Benson: To your home.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: And we -- when I used to go back at nights, nothing was lit. It was dark. The roads were completely dark. And I had to drive. Plus this was a mountainous place. It was the foot of big mountains. So it was even more difficult to get there. But I did it for a number of months.

>> Bill Benson: And you mentioned that you had to get a hold of a stove. But there was no coal to be found.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: No.

>> Bill Benson: How did you get heating?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Once we got the stove, we had to make it work because we had nothing. The only way was to go several miles to the woods and try to find branches, pieces of wood, and drag them back. These big branches. And we had to buy a hand saw to saw them up to make them fit in the stove. So we would have something to cook on and also a little heat because it was cold there.

So we did that, and that was not easy. And also we didn't have enough wood, so in order to conserve the wood at night so the fire wouldn't go out, when we had vegetable peels or anything, we would dry them in the oven and put them so it would smolder enough so the fire wouldn't go out.

>> Bill Benson: Overnight?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Yeah. And this place also was full of mice. And that was absolutely awful.

>> Bill Benson: Are you going to tell us about your dress?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Yeah. When we didn't have anything to store what we had brought, and I had a prized possession, which was in a wooden box in which we folded all the clothes we had brought. Not much, but it was in a wooden box. Before we left, we had a blanket, and the blanket -- there was a dressmaker in the building where we were hiding in Paris who made me a dress, a warm dress, out of the blanket, which was wonderful. So this was my prized possession.

So we had this box in which we had put all of our clothes, including my dress folded up neatly in that little wooden box. The problem is the mice liked it very much, and they made a huge hole in the middle so I couldn't wear it anymore. And my warm dress in the mountains was gone.

>> Bill Benson: You said that was catastrophic for you.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: It was catastrophic because I didn't have much clothes.

>> Bill Benson: Rose-Helene, you also besides having to go into the woods to find bits of wood to use for firewood, you also had to go and find food. You and your grandmother would go do that, get chestnuts. You'd get walnuts.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: No. What we also did to supplement our food was we would go to the woods. This area is famous for chestnuts and for walnuts. But chestnuts we could find in the woods along with the branches. So we would go to the woods and try to find chestnuts, and they were in these prickly little things that you had to open them to take them out. And bring them back. So we had a little food when we cooked it. And as far as chestnuts, those were in gardens of people. So obviously you couldn't go up and take them. But very often they overhung on the road. And what was on the road it was felt was for me.

And there was another thing too that I was telling you about mice. We found someone who was -- we couldn't live with this. It was just awful. So we had a person we became very friendly with, someone who had a whole bunch of kids. And we didn't get milk or things like that because it was rationed. I got maybe a cup of milk every two or three days. I forget what the rationing was. But he had lots of milk because he had a lot of kids. So we bartered. My grandmother was permitted to have a bottle of wine a week

with her ration. Obviously, we didn't drink wine. So he was very eager to change the wine for the milk. And we became friendly with him.

And what he did is we asked him to help us with the mice situation. So he brought every few days he would come with a truck. And eventually he got 12. He should have come before the mice ate my dress.

[ Laughter ]

>> Bill Benson: Rose-Helene, you also shared with me that your grandmother, who was very enterprising, you got a little ration of a bar of chocolate that your grandmother bartered. She would try to repair clothing for people in exchange for food.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: But what I wanted to get to is at some point towards the end of that time, your grandmother tripped and broke several ribs.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: I'm getting to that too. Before my grandmother was very enterprising. And since we nearly had no food, she would go to the different stores, the butcher, the milk place, and she would ask them do you have shirts which need to be fixed, like the collars turned over, the cuffs, because we didn't get anything during the war. So everyone had all things which needed fixing. So everyone said yes. And my grandmother would do it by hand. She would fix that, which was wonderful. But then she fell down. I don't want to be paid. What I want is to have a little meat or a little cheese or a little something. They were very happy to accommodate us, so we would get a little food instead of being paid. So that was one of the things.

But then things became a little more complicated. And this is also when I was so terrified. My grandmother was tiny, and our little place that had one step down. It was a storage place. So she tripped on that step and she broke her ribs. That was catastrophic because it meant she couldn't go out. We couldn't go anywhere.

This was so terrifying because she had to lie flat. You can't do anything for that. If you break your ribs, you have to wait for them to heal. So it meant that I had to -- first of all, I was really, really scared that something was going to happen to her because after all, you know, I was 12 and 13. She was the adult, and I was a child. So I had to do extra things because I couldn't go to the woods to get the wood with my grandmother. I couldn't do anything with her. I had to go by myself to get all of this. Plus I was so scared that something would happen to her. And at night we would sleep together. If she didn't move, I'd touch her to see if she was still alive. And that was awful.

>> Bill Benson: Rose-Helene, as you were telling us, all of the responsibility fell on you at that point. But I know that there's so much more you could tell us about that time. Our time is coming to a close here soon. So I'm going to ask you another question, moving forward a little bit. D-day was June 1944. France was liberated by the Allies in August of 1944. Tell us about your liberation and your return to Paris with your grandmother.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Voiron, where we stayed, was liberated in August of '44. Just a little bit after Paris. We were trying to get back to Paris right away, but unfortunately the trains and the railroads had been bombed so we couldn't go. There were no trains. And what was more difficult is that we had to go nonstop to the train station to see when it would be possible to go back. Eventually we got back in November of '44. And we went to my mother's place. Of course she hadn't come back. But my grandmother's place had been -- we found out that despite the fact that we had been paying the rent, it had been looted. There was nothing left in it, including my prized

possession of my gilded book. One of the few things I had. Everything was taken. And it had been rented to someone else on top of it.

So after the war, it was just so impossible to find a place to live. So we had to go to court to get the place back. And meantime we lived at my mother's place. And eventually my grandmother got her place back after a year or two. And I stayed in my mother's place because I couldn't abandon that because for a long time I felt I was hoping that someone would come back. Of course no one did.

But anyway, in November of '44, I went back to school after I had been out for two years. I had been lucky to be a very good student, and I was one year ahead. So I only lost one year. But I was out for two years. The classes were totally packed with children who had come back like me. I remember my class was -- we were 52 in that class, which is a huge amount of students. But I managed to graduate. And this was very good. Also to get to the other schools. I had to go to -- there were competitions. There were very few seats, which I got to, no problem.

And I could only go for a few weeks. I realized I couldn't go. I had no money. I had to work. And someone had to pay for the food, for the rent, for the utilities. So I had to find a job. Instead of going to school. And I found someone through a friend from school, and I went to work for a stockbroker, this starving little -- but they were very nice. They hired me. And actually I made a career there. And the same place I worked for -- I went there was not even 16, 15 1/2. Started to live on my own when I was 16.

>> Bill Benson: And completely self-supporting at that time.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: I had to. I was very organized. Very aware. I had no choice.

>> Bill Benson: Rose-Helene, if I could ask you just a couple more questions before we close. How long was it that you waited in the hopes that your mother would come back?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: You know, it became very soon, very obvious that they were not coming back. There was a hotel in Paris. Well, the deported people would come, and everyone who was looking for a loved one would go there every few days. And they would say, did you see or did you hear of anyone? And you would give the names of your uncle, your mother. Of course they did not. And of course she didn't come back. And my family didn't come back either.

>> Bill Benson: Did anybody else in your family survive?

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: They didn't come back. So I had to work. And someone asked me once, how did you do it? And I said, you know, I think I wanted to live. Plain and simple.

>> Bill Benson: Plain and simple, you wanted to live. Tell us in the last minute we have --

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: Oh, it's too late.

>> Bill Benson: One more question. When you met Paul and married Paul and came to the United States, you left your grandmother and your cousin.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: I must say that after I started to work, I really tried to make myself a normal life. And I had taken -- what do you call that?

>> Bill Benson: Correspondence courses.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: In order to get what I didn't get normally because I was working. And little by little I started to crawl out of this big hole in which I was in. And finally I got a nice apartment that belonged to a wonderful club. I had terrific friends that

I made. And really my job was not the greatest but it was a nice job. I was valued. It was very nice.

Then I decided to go on vacation. And in May of 1961 to the states. And my friends said, you speak English. Why you don't you go to England? I said I've been there several times. I'm going to the United States. Not the American went to France, the other way around. So I knew a girl from Paris who had immigrated from Paris there. So I went and I decided that that would be a very interesting adventure. And my friends thought that going by myself it would be wiser to give me some addresses of some contacts so I had contacts in Boston and in New York. And Paul was my contact. So that's how we met.

>> Bill Benson: In Washington, D.C.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: In Washington, D.C. And Paul decided -- well, I had asked him to show me around the place. The hotel, everything was fine. He came to visit me in Paris, and we decided to get married. And not knowing each other very much, we got married in October, which is five months later. And in those days there was no computers, there was just mail. So it was interesting. So we actually didn't know each other that well.

>> Bill Benson: Rose-Helene, I wish that we had more time to not only hear more about what you had to skip over, but also about starting your new life here. We also clearly don't have time for you to ask questions of Rose-Helene on stage. But we're going to hear from Rose-Helene again before we close the program. When she's done, can you stay up on the stage, and we invite you, any of you who want to, to come up on stage and meet her, ask a question, shake her hand. No, not yet. Not yet. I'm going to turn back to Rose-Helene in just a second.

I want to thank all of you for being with us. Remind you that we'll have a First Person program each Wednesday and Thursday through August 8 here. You can see them livestreamed through June 6. And all of our programs will be available on the YouTube channel. So one way or the other, we hope you are able to see other First Person programs.

When Rose-Helene is finished, our photographer, Joel, is going to come up on the stage and take a picture of her with you as the background. So we ask that you stay here for that photograph because it's a really incredible memento.

It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person gets the last word. And so with that, I'm going to turn to Rose-Helene to close our program.

>> Rose-Helene Spreiregen: OK. I want to leave you with two thoughts. First I'd like to recall the words of my dear friend, the late Charlene Schiff, also a Holocaust survivor and a longtime volunteer here at the Museum. Charlene often spoke of the four great evils that led to the kind of suffering so profoundly embodied in the Holocaust. Ignorance, intolerance, indifference, and injustice. Ignorance, intolerance, indifference and injustice.

The second I'd like to draw on the morality of Abraham Lincoln. If we are to have freedom, how can freedom be denied anyone? If we are to have justice, how can justice be denied anyone? And if there is hatred in our hearts, what then is love for the rest of us?

Thank you.