Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person
Susan Darvas
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Remote CART Captioning

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>> Ladies and gentlemen, the program will begin. Please be sure to silence all of your cell phones. Thank you.
>> 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 Susan Darvas , 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. Susan will share with us her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes.
If time allows we will have an opportunity for you to Ask Susan a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our 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 tomorrow's First Person program live on the Museum's website at 11:00 a.m. Eastern Standard Time. A recording of this program will be made available on the Museum's YouTube page. Please visit the First Person website, listed on the back of your program, for more details.
What you are about to hear from Susan is one individual’s account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Susan was born Susan Lakatos on April 24, 1934, in Budapest, Hungary. She grew up in a Jewish family. This is a photo of her at age 3 or 4 on a tricycle. Her father Mano owned his own dental practice and her mother Margit assisted in the office.
Susan was an only child but had a large extended family. Here we see her maternal grandparents. In September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland beginning World War II.
Fearing the worst, Susan's uncle Laszlo decided to immigrate to England to protect his two young daughters. Laszlo tried to convince Susan's father, Mano, to join him, but was unsuccessful as Mano believed Hungary would be safe from Nazi invasion. This photo was taken of Susan's extended family after her uncle Laszlo had left Hungary. On the left in front is Susan's mother and Susan is the little girl in the middle. Directly behind Susan is her father. Also in this photo are three of Susan's uncles and one aunt.
In March 1944, Germany occupied Hungary and began forcing Jews who lived outside of Budapest to relocate to ghettos in city centers. By mid-May of 1944, the Hungarian authorities, in coordination with the German Security Police, began to systematically deport Hungarian Jews. Jews in the city of Budapest were, at first, spared deportation.
In late 1944, through his connections with non-Jews in Hungary, Mano was able to secure an affidavit which allowed the family to move into an area of the city under the protection of the Spanish government. This zoomed-in map of Budapest shows the location of the Budapest Ghetto as well as the International Ghetto where Susan and her family crowded into a small apartment with five other families.
Food and water were scarce. By early 1945, attacks from the Allies were becoming more and more frequent. Soviet forces liberated the Buda section of the city in February 1945. Soviet troops drove the last German units and their Arrow Cross collaborators out of western Hungary in early April 1945. Shortly thereafter, a communist regime began in Hungary.
Susan escaped communist Hungary with her husband and they eventually made their way to the United States. We close with this photo of Susan and her mother in 1947.
Following Susan and her husband's escape from Hungary in 1956 and a stay in a refugee camp, they made it to England then moved to the United States in 1958. After four years in Chicago they moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Susan pursued graduate education at the University of Michigan and her husband was a professor of architecture. Susan obtained master's degrees in Library Science and Comparative Literature and completed all but her dissertation toward a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature.
In 1972 Susan moved to Washington, D.C., to work for the Library of Congress for eight years. Later she earned a master's in Clinical Social Work at the Catholic University National School of Social Work. She then worked as a clinician at the Johns Hopkins Compulsive Gambling Treatment Center before becoming Director of Family Services for the Compulsive Gambling Program at Taylor Manor Hospital in Maryland. Susan then worked for the Department of Defense as a clinician in the Employee Assistance Service until her retirement in 2009.
She continued her work with the Department of Defense as an executive coach as a contractor until early 2018. During this period she also maintained a private psychotherapy practice. Over the past year Susan worked full time on her memoir

"Endure, Resist, Escape; Growing up during Nazism and Communism in Hungary," which will be published this July by Summit Crossroads Press/Amanita Books.
Susan has two children and five grandchildren and now has a great granddaughter who was born 4 months ago. Her daughter Andrea is a judge in Washington State and has twins age 32. Her son Peter retired as a special agent from the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, or NCIS, and is now a senior special investigator with San Diego City. Peter has three children ages 24 to 18.
Besides volunteer work with this Museum's library, Susan has been volunteering in her community in suburban Maryland for Neighbor Drive, providing rides for senior citizens to the doctor and other appointments. She loves nature, walking and hiking, travel, literature, opera, and classical music. She is now writing the second volume of her memoirs.And today Suze an is joined by several good friends. With that, I'd like you to join me in welcoming our First Person Susan Darvas.
Susan, thank you so much for joining us today and being willing to be our First Person. Thank you. We are so --
>> Susan Darvas: Thank you for having me.
>> Bill Benson: You could sit here with us for the entire afternoon and evening and only touch on all that you can share, but we have to compress it into one hour. So we'll begin if you don't mind.
>> Susan Darvas: OK.
>> Bill Benson: Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, the year before your birth. Before you tell us about what you and your family went through during the Holocaust and World War II, tell us first a little bit about your family and you in the early years before war began.
>> Susan Darvas: Well, in my tricycle days, when I was very young, I had I guess what everybody would consider a happy childhood. I was an only child. Cherished, loved, and protected really, shielded from outside problems. My father was a dentist and also developed and owned a dental laboratory in Budapest. And made a decent living. We were by no means wealthy, but it was a comfortable middle class existence. I never really knew hardship until I was about, oh, maybe 6 years old, 6 or 7 years old. I'm telling you this because I think that that early stability and love and freedom of spirit probably made it possible for me to survive emotionally as well as physically what happened later.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little bit about your mother.
>> Susan Darvas: Well, my mother had -- my mother was 18 years younger than my father, which in those days, in Europe, wasn't all that extraordinary. But it was still pushing the limit of the usual arrangement. And she had lost both her mother and her only sister at a young age and was actually brought up by her second cousins. And my father was one of them. The four brothers really kind of mentored her and took care of her. And then my father was about 42 years old, and it finally dawned on him that this young woman whom he protected and cherished was really a beautiful person, and they loved each other and got married. And then they had me.
>> Bill Benson: Your parents moved from the Pest part of Budapest where their dental practice was located to Buda. Where did they make that move?
>> Susan Darvas: When I was very young, the tricycle picture, shortly after the tricycle picture, my father had suffered all his life from something that is very hard to tell what

the diagnosis would be today but very much like emphysema. So the polluted air of Pest, which was the industrial and business part of Budapest, the air quality was very poor. So for his health, we moved to Buda, which is a beautiful, hilly, naturally endowed place in the hills. We had a garden and a flat at that point. Not a whole house. It was a lovely, lovely place to grow up. We had a garden. I could climb the trees and be outdoors, which was a passion of mine actually from very early on.
>> Bill Benson: We mentioned in the introduction with the slides that just before the war, your uncle moved with his family to England. You were very close to his children. Tell us why your father did not go with him. Because Laszlo wanted him to come and what it meant to you when they left.
>> Susan Darvas: Good question. I'm still wondering. Well, my father was a wonderful man. A bright, charismatic, great leadership abilities. I'll talk more about him later, all the things he accomplished. However, he was a hopeless idealist. And he like so many other people at that time -- it might be difficult for you to believe that after what everybody here has been witnessing, certainly the last 50 or 60 years around the world. But he really did not believe that civilized people would descend to the depths of violence and savagery as they actually did. After all Germany and certainly Hungary were highly civilized, highly educated people. Liked classical music and literature and poetry and philosophy. And how could they become savages? It was unthinkable. But it happened.
>> Bill Benson: And it began with World War II starting September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. The full impact of the war, of course, wouldn't come to Hungary until several years later. Tell us what the first years of the war were like for your family before they really got unbearably awful.
>> Susan Darvas: Well, of course, remember I was a very young child.
>> Bill Benson: Right.
>> Susan Darvas: And I was protected from the worst of it. But by that time various anti-Jewish, anti-Semetic laws came into being. For instance, you couldn't really go to university. Only -- I don't know, 5% -- I don't know the exact figures. I have not looked it up. But very few Jews would be accepted in higher education, institutions of higher education. Certain professions became gradually barred from Jews. So my father obviously felt that and so did my mother, the impact of this.
And increasingly there was some social isolation and discrimination. It didn't touch me directly because, a, I was an only child of an -- I already stated my cousins were gone. That was a big loss. There were no other children in the family. I didn't really have friends as a young child before going to school because of the isolation. So it did not affect me until kindergarten age. And then I began to experience discrimination after 1940.
>> Bill Benson: After 1940.Say a little more about that, yeah.
>> Susan Darvas: Well, I was a confident kid. And then suddenly when you're in school, they call you a dirty Jew. And I remember being very puzzled by that because my mother was a stickler for hygiene. So I was extremely clean. You know, I didn't quite know about metaphor at that point. So I knew I wasn't dirty. And so why am I being called dirty? And Jew also puzzled me because we were not observant Jews. I mean we did the High Holidays at distant relatives' houses because, you know, we were Jewish.

But my father was pretty much an agnostic. Humanistic values. He was highly moral. He made sure that I was well versed both in the old and the new testament. And ethics. And morals. But he was not a religious person. So I knew about the Jewish tradition and was very proud of it because it was so old, you know. But I did not -- of course, we did not participate in a congregation or a community, which became a problem because I didn't have that kind of support.
>> Bill Benson: Support.
>> Susan Darvas: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: At some point, you had some distant relatives I think from Transylvania who came to visit, and you said their visit caused you -- you told me that it caused you these feelings of genuine foreboding.
>> Susan Darvas: Well, interesting you would bring that up. So here I am a protected kid, protected kid, not really knowing what's going on, and exposed only to my father's very hopeful, very upbeat sense that the war will be over, the Allies will be the superior military, and the vanquish the Germans and everything will be cool, right?
So one day -- I think it was 5 or 6. I really don't remember. But these strangers show up, and to me they were truly strangers or out of a book that I have read. They were Hasidic Jews. Some were from what was now Romania, Transylvania. And, you know, they wore strange clothing and had hats and everything that I hadn't seen until now except in books.
And they joined us for a beautiful Sunday dinner which we had every Sunday. The table full of wonderful, home-cooked food and conversation and happiness. And here they were, and they were messengers of doom. They were telling us what was happening in Transylvania. Where Jews were killed, small communities were wiped out. Not even decimated. And they talked to us about concentration camps. You know, I was a kid. I understood half of it. But somehow I was hit with an understanding, an emotional impact really, of -- that something terrible is happening. Not was happening, is happening. So it was like given the messengers of doom, I remember it was like the clouds came over the sky. It was a beautiful day. And I just -- darkness descended.
>> Bill Benson: That's a very powerful image of feeling that as a child.
>> Susan Darvas: Well, that's really what I remember because as a child you don't have too many words about it. And I remember I just couldn't eat anymore. I just had to leave the table. And from then on, I knew that things were not good.
>> Bill Benson: With the war on, the Allies began bombing Budapest. And you shared with me that you and your father would stand on the balcony. Say a little bit about that.
>> Susan Darvas: Well, yes. Anybody here witnessed an air vessel -- OK, in those days, I guess it's not that spectacular. But here are the Allied bombers coming over the city. And we are in Buda, right? We feel very safe because at that time only the industrial park is where the bombs were going. Pest itself wasn't bombed. So what a child sees is these dots in the sky. And then you see the fire and then see the fighter pilots chasing off. It was really a spectacle. And then -- and here the sinister stuff comes in. You suddenly see explosions. Very colorful. The planes go past, and then explode. And they go down.
So anyway, I was in the garden. Actually, I was in my favorite cherry tree. I liked to climb trees. And my father calls me up. Come on, you've got to see this. And so I go up to the balcony and join him. And I don't understand why he is so happy. And I said, how

can you tell which one is which? I mean, I couldn't tell when the plane came down that it was a friendly plane or whether it was the other. And I think he thought that he could tell. But in any case, what he got away from this -- and my father was not stupid -- was that the war will be over. And that's what he told me. You know, this is a display of superior air power. And the war will never really come here. And we will be free in no time.
>> Bill Benson: In no time. I want you to tell us about -- you were told you must I guess at school knit socks for Hungarian soldiers. This is your patriotic duty.
>> Susan Darvas: Well, OK. I started out in private school, kind of a year early. And so after a while you were not allowed if you were Jewish to go to any private schools, and this particular school was shut down because it was affiliated with the British Embassy. So I have to restart the same grade, you know, at public school.
But in the public school, this was a time that Hungarian troops were forced to fight on the Russian front, which was of course the worst possible place to fight, in Siberia. It was very cold. A very harsh environment. So one of the I guess the equivalent of home e C classes, we were taught how to knit and were ordered to knit for the troops, you know, scarves and socks to keep them warm. And I was in a conundrum because I didn't really want to support to me enemy troops because I did not want them to win. On the other hand, they were the relatives, brothers and fathers, of my school mates. And I did not want them to freeze either.
So it kind of was an interesting -- as I look back on it problem, and characteristically the way I solved it in the end was to knit. But I wasn't a good knitter anyway, so it wasn't a big effort. But I made sure they were very ugly socks. That's what I did. I'm not proud of it, but that's what I did.
>> Bill Benson: At some point of course, you and your family were forced to leave your home in the Buda part of Budapest and go to Pest. Where were you forced to go, and what did that mean for you?
>> Susan Darvas: OK. So things kept on getting worse. And so Buda, which was a nice place, Jews were not allowed to live in Buda at all. So we were ordered out of our flat, leaving all of our belongings behind. Everybody was allowed to pack a suitcase. Not a very big suitcase. You had to carry it. I remember packing my books. And there was a dog called Peter. My son is now called Peter.
And so we were forced out. And this was immediate. It's not like you got a few months notice to prepare. It was one day to 48 hours. And we had to move into a marked house, certain houses in Pest were designated as Jewish houses. And there would be a huge big Jewish star above the entrance designating it so everybody would know that this -- only carriers lived there, you know. Not real people.
So we moved into an apartment with several other families. And the apartment was a very nice spacious apartment for two people. However, it was now, I don't know, four or five families.
>> Bill Benson: Four or five families.
>> Susan Darvas: Yeah. And there was one bathroom, full bath, and one toilet. And we had to share that. And of course one kitchen. Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: And at that time, you told me that food really began to get scarce. Will you say a little bit about that and what you were able to do about it?

>> Susan Darvas: Well, you know, that was a gradual transition from what I experienced. The Hungarians in general are very food oriented. Jews are food orgented. So you put the two together, and you know that you had plenty of good food around at all times. And then as the war progressed, of course, all the resources were redirected towards the military and the front. Able-bodied men were taken away from farming and fewer -- much less food was produced. At any rate, it was very scarce. And everybody was rationed. Not just Jews. However, we were under curfew. We were allowed out only two or three hours a day in the late afternoon. And of course by that time all the food was gone from the stores. So most of it was gone.
>> Bill Benson: So that was the only time you were allowed to shop, in that one afternoon period.
>> Susan Darvas: Or to just get out.
>> Bill Benson: Or to get out period.
>> Susan Darvas: Yes. And we had to wear yellow stars. I remember my mother cutting out -- it had to be a certain color of yellow. I still don't understand why that was. But they were very particular. And it had to be a certain size. And they were quite big. About, well, this big. And it had to be sewn on all the -- imagine that you have to -- it's like the scarlet letter except much bigger, right? So when you are out on the street, everybody knows that you are a Jew, which means that they can abuse you, and they did.
>> Bill Benson: Jewish men were forced to go to labor battalions to help the Hungarians in their fight with the Nazis against the Russians. What happened to your father when he was forced to go to the labor battalion?
>> Susan Darvas: Well, I don't know how that was arranged. I never found out. But of course because he was able to return after several weeks, which was a good thing because he had this emphysema and he couldn't have survived heavy labor for any length of time. So we were very, very scared while he was away. I remember my mother taking all kinds of public transportation at that time to visit him way outside of the city, taking him some food and making sure that he was OK. But one day he reappeared, and he was released then until the end of the war. And we'll talk about that later. Wounded.
>> Bill Benson: As terrible as things were for Jews in Hungary at that time, of course they turned so dramatically worse in March of 1944 when the Germans occupied Hungary. Tell us how things changed and what you recall of that once the Germans were now in control of Hungary.
>> Susan Darvas: OK. So imagine that you are experiencing kind of the way I now visualize it is a gradual descent to hell, you know? You are abused, discriminated against, ousted from your home, from your environment. Suddenly having to share very scarce resources, both physical and spatial resources with lots of others. Very little food. Although for the longest time, I didn't starve because of course my parents, whatever food there was, they would save it for me. And I didn't realize, of course, the sacrifice at the time. But that's how it was.
But then at that point, there was no food basically. Bread was highly, highly cherished. Wheat disappeared altogether. We would eat beans. And that was -- and potatoes. That was the highlight. Potatoes were great. Later on that disappeared entirely. Also the bombardments started. The Allies intensified the air raids. And the sirens awakening us to the bombardments. At the beginning, maybe a couple of times a day, usually in the

afternoon so you could kind of prepare for that. But then eventually it was like technically nonstop.
Now the problem with that was we didn't have air raid shelters. Very few but certainly not for us. So people would try to find shelter in the cellar. And I mean cellar. It was to keep the food cold, but at the time the food was gone. And there would be no electricity eventually. We had electricity at this point maybe two or three hours a day, and then we would have some hot water to wash in. Otherwise, it would be cold water. Anyhow, those circumstances were rather difficult. And so in the overcrowded houses, to get down in the cellar, you really had to hurry. And then you couldn't find any place to be.
So pretty soon I tried not to go down there because it was like hell. People are sick. They were moaning. They had anxiety attacks because if you got hit you were killed. And I remember how houses around our house took hits. And our house took a some hits but if it was a firebomb it didn't destroy the whole house. And men would be carrying water up to the roof to extinguish it. Sometimes we children were allowed to help in doing that. So that at least gave you something to do.
>> Bill Benson: I want you to tell us about that extraordinary incident where you were -- had an opportunity to go on an outing to Buda.
>> Susan Darvas: OK. I told you about growing up in Buda, in the hills. And I was always happiest outside. And one of the places -- Budapest, by the way, if you have a chance to visit it, it's a beautiful, beautiful city. Full of natural springs and from Roman times on. And all kind of spas and swimming pools are built around those natural springs. I'm telling you this because one of my favorite places as a child growing up was to go to these swimming pools which were surrounded by park-like areas.
So anyhow, here I am shut up in this danky old building in the city, not being allowed out. And, you know, few children around. And we would play in the stairwells. These are old houses, you know. Running up and down. And then there would be a courtyard, a very small courtyard surrounded by -- on all four sides by I don't know how many stories. Anyway, no sunlight and no outdoors, right?
So suddenly one day a friend of my father's, dental assistant, a beautiful woman, who became a friend, shows up with a German officer, a Wehrmacht officer. So the whole house was sent into panic because German officers, Wehrmacht officers specifically, were bad news. German officers were very bad news, and Wehrmacht were very bad news. But however, they had brought some food. And they knew me.
And she said, you look kind of, you know, very pale and kind of unhappy. Would you like to go to the pool? And I said, yeah! And my parents said no way. I mean, that's extremely dangerous. You get caught, you'll get killed. And the Wehrmacht officer said not with me, you know. He was younger. So they finally let me go.
So we had to go to the Buda side. And it's a beautiful, sunny day. And if anybody was ever in prison -- I wasn't, but it must be the feeling, you know, after solitary confinement or something, the feeling that you're finally outdoors. So I loved it. And this was a very special pool equipped in those days -- it was unheard of -- with a wave machine. That was the best that you could do in Hungary, which is landlocked. So it was a wave machine.
So there I was, happy. Very happy. And then suddenly again something hit me internally. It's like a darkness descended. I guess it was a foreboding. And I suddenly

knew I had to get out of there. So I went back and I said we've got to go. They said why? You know, everything is fine. We've got to go. And they heard the urgency in my voice and they picked up and left and went back home. So I had a beautiful few hours. And then I got back home, you know, to the Jewish house.
Well, next day they called us up -- yeah, I think we still had telephones. And told us that not 10 minutes after we finally left the police came looking for a little Jewish girl. Yeah. So somebody must have recognized me and reported that I was there. And so ever since then, I really trust my intuition. I trusted it then, but I trust it --
>> Bill Benson: Trust it totally now.
>> Susan Darvas: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: You were abruptly forced out of the Jewish house. Tell us where you were forced to go and then what happened once you were forced from there.
>> Susan Darvas: Well, OK. Now we are talking later in 1944, which was really the first part of Nazi terror. When I say worst part, the government, which was of course pro Nazi government, before led by somebody called Horte, did start some of the more extreme violence in Budapest. But the Hungarian Arrow Cross took over.
>> Bill Benson: That was the fascist party.
>> Susan Darvas: Took over the country, which was the fascist Nazi party, installed by Hitler. And then -- so remember the city is under constant air raids. Supplies are not there. Everybody is suffering. But you are segregated from everybody else, and you get very few resources. But at least you're not being killed, not yet. They we started hearing about the concentration camps from the countryside because that's where they started it all. But it didn't quite hit Budapest yet, which is why we were overcrowded because on top of all the people who lived in the apartment, refugees from the countryside who were fleeing the deportations were show up if they knew somebody in the house. So we had just constant migration.
So now the Arrow Cross, who was interestingly populated mostly by young, ruthless people who themselves I think knew hardship and didn't have a vocation or an occupation, they were given guns and weapons and they were told that it was a free for all as far as Jews were concerned. So they would roam the street and come in and raid the Jewish houses, which were readily identifiable, of course. And you would just hear the people out. And with no rhyme or reason or scheduling, you never knew when it would hit. So we actually had sentries. The men organized themselves to forewarn. But the forewarning was maybe five minutes at most, when you saw people coming down the street.
So anyhow, on one occasion that I remember very clearly, we were all -- at a moment's notice really herded out of the house, men, women, children, the elderly, the sick, everybody, and we didn't have time to grab anything with you. So whatever was in your hands or if you tried to get a coat or something. So we were then herded through the streets of Budapest with our arms above our heads. And I was a kid. I could do that. But it was hard for my father. It was hard for older people. And this went on for hours. We were marched all around the city and crowds -- sure, there were some people that were sympathetic. But they had to keep their mouth shut because it was dangerous to show support. But many people, if we had a coat or a scarf, they would grab it away from us and there would be jeering. It was horrible. It was humiliating and horrible. And

eventually after hours of this -- I think it was a couple of hours. Maybe longer. And you couldn't drop your arms.
>> Bill Benson: You had to keep your arms up?
>> Susan Darvas: Because then you got shot. And people did get shot who couldn't hold their arms up after a while. So we were herded to the synagogue. There's a huge big synagogue still there. Now it's refurbished. It's a beautiful building. And already it was crowded with people like us. And then the overcrowding was horrible. I don't want to spell it out. And of course we were held there without food, without bathroom facilities, et cetera. And for a couple of days. And then periodically groups of people would be removed. And we knew, you know, and the information was there that they were taken to the railroad at the brick factory and there they were deported to Auschwitz or other concentration camps in these cars, railroad cars. So we knew it was just a question of time that we would be taken as well. But we weren't. It was so irrational then. Suddenly after two days of this, it was just terror. Abject terror. We were told to go home. To go. And we had no idea why. Just like we didn't have any idea why we were taken there. So we went home to the Jewish house. And it felt like a reprieve, and it was a reprieve.
>> Bill Benson: A reprieve, yeah. And then from there, you would find refuge for a period --
>> Susan Darvas: Well, even my idealistic father, who by that time had to accept that the unacceptable and the unthinkable was in fact happening, realized -- because he was a very practical man actually -- that we couldn't stay there. We had to get out somehow. But you couldn't get out at that point from the country or from Budapest. So the only thing that seemed like a safer place was to get into the Internal Ghetto. We got into the International Ghetto. And somehow he secured Spanish affidavit for us. Which turned out to be fake, of course, but we didn't know that. So we were moved to a different part of town. It was shown on the map. And that's where we survived the rest of the war.
>> Bill Benson: And of course as you mentioned earlier, the bombardments are getting more and more intense while you're even in now the new place that you are in, the Spanish house.
>> Susan Darvas: At that point they were nonstop. The sirens were pointless.
>> Bill Benson: You shared with me as they were rounding up and grabbing Jews where they could find them, some of them were being taken to the Danube river River and shot right there on the river, and you were in a place where you could see what was going on from your building.
>> Susan Darvas: Well, that was pretty surreal. I told you that the Jewish house was crowded. Well, this place was what -- people slept all over the floor. I had a privileged place under the piano because I was small enough to fit there. And, you know, these houses, whoever owned them or lived in them before they were already gone, the furniture was there so that didn't help the crowding.
So the air raid shelters were much worse. It was like if anybody ever read "the lower depths," I highly recommend it, it's a beautiful book, but it was like that. It was like being in hell in that cellar. Of course there is no light. By then there is no electricity. There is no food. People are sick. There are no doctors. They are moaning. The dead are not taken away because there is no place to take them. It was bad.

So I tried not to be down there at all. My mother was down there. But my father and I often went up. Even though it was very dangerous to be in the apartment. So from there you could overlook the Danube. There was a park there. And so groups of people were taken from neighboring protected houses. Mostly at that point from the Swiss protected houses. For some reason, that was -- they just went there, the Nazis did, almost immediately.
And what I saw was not that they were shot. I saw them there. And then from one minute to another, they were gone. So you knew they hadn't left because it was a group of people. You would have seen them leaving. But they were gone. And they were in the distance. You didn't hear the gunshots. At that point, there was already artillery. Budapest was under artillery siege. It was sour rounded by the Soviet army. So we couldn't hear anything. But we knew. We knew what happened.
And then later on, if you ever go to Budapest, and you go down to the Danube, you will see the sculpture of shoes, because you see the Nazis were very efficient. I'm sorry if there are young people who are traumatized by this. But they would have to remove their shoes before they were shot and thrown into the Danube. It was that kind of savagery. It was totally, totally incredible.
>> Bill Benson: As the Russians advanced and began to completely besiege the city, you're right in the middle of the siege that was going on. Tell us a little bit about that. And then about your liberation. And while you're thinking, one of the lines you said to me, that at this point now everyone is starving, and bread -- this was your words, bread was like diamonds.
>> Susan Darvas: Yes. Food became -- you learned a lesson that possessions are irrelevant. Food is sustaining life. So, yes, we didn't have of course any bread. And I have other stories about what happened to some jewelry that my mother had but that was actually after the war. So I -- there was a bakery close by that was open for a few hours, still functioning. But of course we couldn't get there because at that point we couldn't get out of the house at all.
But I was -- I was maybe 9 then or 10. And I didn't look particularly Jewish. I mean, the idea of the people of what Jewish looks like. And so I decided that, a, I had enough in the house, and, b, my parents would really love some bread. And moreover, I would love some bread. So I gave it a try. So I snuck out and went to several blocks where there was of course a long line at the bakery.
And I stood in line but some people took actually a picture of me and let me advance in the line, which was great. But I felt like a fraud really because here I was, you know, masquerading like I was human, right? So at any rate, I did get a loaf of bread. But it was a piece of a loaf of bread and took it home. And I never had a meal like that in my whole life.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about liberation. Tell us about liberation and particularly about what happened in your apartment.
>> Susan Darvas: Liberation. So all right. If anybody in the audience is a veteran or anybody saw combat, that's what it was. There was street-by-street fighting. The Nazis -- it was totally irrational. They knew the war was ending. They were defeated. The city was surrounded by the Soviets. The air raids stopped because there was street-to-street fighting. But the artillery fire was constant.

So being anywhere was -- much of the city was almost in rubble. And certainly our building was also severely damaged. Anyhow, so finally in a neighboring building, we hear cheers, right? I was upstairs with my father. And several other people in the apartment who couldn't tolerate the cellar. And we hear cheers. We hear people shouting and singing. And in those days you didn't hear that. I mean, there was no reason to do that. So what's happening?
It felt -- somebody spotted a Soviet soldier on the street, which would have meant normally that the Nazis are gone and we are -- we survived. So we started cheering. And people came out from the cellar. And we hugged. And it was good. Until everything went dark and things were flying in the apartment. Anyhow, a fleeing Nazi threw a grenade and it somehow found its way into the apartment.
>> Bill Benson: Right into your unit.
>> Susan Darvas: Where we were, yes. It wasn't the building -- the building wasn't targeted from the outside. This thing flew in through the window actually.
>> Bill Benson: Into your room.
>> Susan Darvas: Yes. And I was there of course with many other people. And anyhow, what happened, I was unscathed. I kind of dove under the piano. I don't know how I knew that. But instinct took over. But many other people were -- my father was actually crippled for life as it turned out. And many other people there -- some of them were relatives, an uncle and aunt were hurt.
So forever after that, when there's some joy or escape from a bad situation I always look over my shoulder for something bad to happen, and of course it doesn't. But it marked me for life.
>> Bill Benson: And your father was seriously hurt. He never really did recover from it.
>> Susan Darvas: He survived. But we didn't know that he would for a while.
>> Bill Benson: So as you said, we survived. The war is over for us. But the war is still going on elsewhere. What do we do next? And in the little time we have left, maybe share a little bit about -- and particularly when your aunt came to get you and took you to her place.
>> Susan Darvas: Well, what I did not have an occasion to share is I'm talking to you, all of the atrocities, all of the cruelty and nastiness and evil that happened. But mixed with that, all along, there were good people. There were people who at the risk of their lives tried to help. My aunt was one of them.
My youngest uncle was married to a Catholic girl who was able to maintain a flat in the house that they used to live in. And while she still could, she tried shipping some food to us. And then of course she couldn't anymore. Anyhow, she found us and waded through the rubble. Of course there were no telephones or any of that yet. They were destroyed. The infrastructure was destroyed.
So she found us. And she told us that parts of her apartment was intact. Part of the building was gone actually. So we found our way through the rubble of what the city was at that point, and I have vivid memories of this. At that point, you know, the leveling of the city. The roads. There were no roads. They were all blown up. It was horrific, the trip. And it took us a long time. But then we had some shelter. And we weren't quite as crowded as we were. We didn't have much food.

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that when you got to your aunt's place, you were told don't open that door because if you open that door, it just opened into a sheared-off building.
>> Susan Darvas: I peeked when my aunt opened the door. Sheer drop. It was like a stage set, if you've ever seen it. It was amazing. Some of that image is still with me. It's the end. You open the door, and there is just space.
>> Bill Benson: Susan, before we close our program, one last question for you. In light of all that your parents went through, they had to have been just utterly terrified, despite your father's optimistic outlook, for much of those years you have just described. How do you think your parents were able to carry on and protect you as they did through all of that?
>> Susan Darvas: I don't know. I think -- some might try but I think love conquers all. They just loved me.
>> Bill Benson: They just loved you.
>> Susan Darvas: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: We're not going to have time for questions from the audience for Susan. As you can see, we only -- I think you realize we only just touched on so much of what Susan could have shared with us today. But we're going to hear from Susan again to close our program. But when Susan is done, you'll remain here with us on the stage.
>> Susan Darvas: Sure.
>> Bill Benson: And we invite any of you who want to come up on the stage at that point to meet Susan, ask her the question you didn't get to ask, have your picture taken with her, whatever you'd like to do. We really mean that. We'd like you to come up and do that. If I had more time, I would ask Susan to describe something years later which she escaped from Hungary. Because that alone is worth reading a book about. In fact, there will be a book about it, as a matter of fact. So you're going to want to read about that and everything else.
I want to thank all of you for being with us. I'll remind you we'll have a program tomorrow. It will be live-streamed. But all of our programs this year will be available on the YouTube channel of the Museum so you can -- if you can't get back here in person, you can see any and all of our programs, including Susan's from today, which will be posted soon. It's our tradition here at First Person that our First Person gets the last word.
And so I'm going to turn to Susan to close our program. And when Susan is done, and we ask you to stay with us for this, our photographer Joel is going to come up on the stage and take a photograph of Susan with you as the background. And it's just a great image for Susan. So we ask that you stay for that as well.
So on that note, Susan.
>> Susan Darvas: Thank you. Thank you for coming and listening to me. I truly appreciate that. I spoke enough and I will try not to add too many words. But I want to share with you some of the things I have learned, hopefully not too many.
I think it's important to remember that fear and hate and rage can turn otherwise good people into monsters. Please remember that. You don't want to turn into monsters. Being educated is very important for a variety of reasons. But it will not save you from becoming what I saw amongst many of the people who participated in these atrocities.

They were highly educated and loved music, loved theater. But they lost their moral compass.
What is truly important to remember is that your moral values as to what's right and what's wrong in treating other people is your greatest asset. And that's what I try to live by. And that sometimes it takes great courage to stick by. We can see that today. In this country but elsewhere, all over the world. So I read a passage from Anne Frank. Most of you are familiar with her. She survived and then died just after liberation. She was a 14-year-old girl when she died, and she had a diary.
And she said there shortly before her death, how wonderful it is that nobody need wait a moment before starting to improve the world. And she was hiding. She was persecuted. And she was ready to improve the world when she could. So please do the same. Don't wait a day. And try to improve the world. Thank you very much.