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U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

"First Person"

Estelle Laughlin

August 1st, 2019.

BILL BENSON: Estelle Laughlin was born in Warsaw Poland, on July 9th, 1929. On this map of Europe, in 1933, the arrow points to the area of Warsaw, Poland. Estelle Laughlin was the younger of two sisters in addition to her parents, including many aunts uncles and cousins Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939, soon after the invasion, Estelle Laughlin and her family were forced to move into the Warsaw ghetto.

This photo of Estelle Laughlin was taken when she came to the United States. In 1943, the family went into hiding, in a bunker in the ghetto.

The Warsaw ghetto uprising began on April 19th, 1943; and continued until the final liquidation of the ghetto on May 16th, 1943.

Jewish fighters faced overwhelmingly superior forces, of the Germans, but were able to hold them off for a month. Estelle and her family were in hiding in a bunker during the uprising and were among those discovered and forced out of hiding. We see here, an historical photograph of German soldiers, leading Jews captured during the Warsaw ghetto uprising to the assembly point for deportation. In May 1943.

After they were discovered, Estelle and her family were deported to Majdanek, where

Estelle's father cause willed. This is an historic photograph of the barracks at Majdanek.

Estelle, her mother and sister endured labor in two more camps before eventually being liberated by the Russians

Estelle, her mother and sister immigrated to the United States in 1947, on the marine flasher. We close with Estelle's immigration certificate, which was issued in July of 1947....

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[STAND BY FOR LIVE CAPTIONS]

>> Ladies and gentlemen, the program will begin shortly. Please silence your cell phones. Or other electronics, thank you.

BILL BENSON:

Good morning. Welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I am 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 **Mrs. Estelle Laughlin**, 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 2019 program will continue through next Thursday, August 8th. The museum's

website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Estelle 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 Estelle 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](https://twitter.com/holocaustmuseum) and the hashtag [#AskWhy](https://twitter.com/askwhy).

A recording of this program will be made available on the

Museum's YouTube page. Please visit the *First Person* website, listed on the back of your program, for more details. What you are about to hear from Estelle is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Estelle Laughlin was born in Warsaw, Poland, on July 9th, 1929, which means that she just celebrated, an important milestone birthday. A couple of weeks ago. On this map, of Europe in 1933, the arrow points to the area of Warsaw, Poland.

Estelle was the younger of two sisters, in addition to her parents, her family included many aunts, uncles and cousins. Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1st 1939, soon after the invasion, Estelle and her family were forced to move into the Warsaw ghetto. This photograph of Estelle was taken when she came to the United States,

In 1943, the family went into hiding, in a bunker in the ghetto. The Warsaw ghetto uprising began on April 19th, 1943, and continued until the final liquidation of the ghetto on May 16th, 1943. Jewish fighters faced overwhelmingly superior forces of the Germans but were able to hold them off for a full month. Let me and her family were hiding in a bunker during the uprising and were among those, who were discovered and forced out of hiding. We see here, an historical photograph of German soldiers, leading Jews captured during the Warsaw ghetto uprising to the assembly point for

deportation in May 1943.

After they were discovered, Estelle and her family were deported to the Majdanek camp where Estelle's father was killed. This was an historical photograph of the barracks at Majdanek.

Estelle, her mother, and sister endured labor in two more camps before eventually being liberated by the Russians.

Estelle her mother and sister immigrated to the United States, in 1947, on the marine flasher.

We close with Estelle's immigration certificate, which was issued in July of 1947.

When Estelle, her sister and mother, arrived in New York, in 1947, they had \$30 between them.

Estelle and her sister went to work in the garment district. She met her husband, who was a survivor from Berlin in New York, after marrying, they moved to Cleveland, where her husband was a labor organizer, after the birth of her first son, Estelle began attending college, in Cleveland, and finished after they moved to the Washington, D.C. area. In 1961, when her husband joined the Kennedy administration.

Estelle became a teacher, in Montgomery County Maryland, earned a master's degree, and became a reading specialist.

She retired in 1992.

Estelle's three sons, are very accomplished. One is a professor of geology, another is a psychologist, and a third has his own business, between them, they have given Estelle seven grandchildren, one for each day of the week as she notes

[LAUGHTER]

BILL BENSON: She also has 3 great-grandchildren. Estelle's husband died in 2008. She moved eight years ago from the Washington, D.C. area, to Chicago,

to be close to family.

Estelle volunteers at the museum's speakers bureau, until her 2011 move to Chicago, she was also a member of the survivor positive writing group and a contributor to the museum's publication, "Echoes of Memory". She wrote a book about her and her family's experience during the Holocaust entitled *Transcending Darkness: A Girl's Journey Out of the Holocaust*, it was a finalist for the 2012 Forward Reviews Book of the Year Awards and she has now finished her second book, a work of fiction for young adults, about the Warsaw ghetto, with a working title of "Malka's Escape" she expects final word from her publisher any day now about its publication date. Following our program today, Estelle will sign copies of *Transcending Darkness*, and accompanied by -- accompanied, Estelle today are her good friend a fellow Holocaust survivor and her families David and Lindsey, so we welcome those, with us today, and with that I would like to ask you to join me in welcoming our "First Person"... Mrs. Estelle Laughlin!

[APPLAUSE]

BILL BENSON: Estelle, thank you so much, for joining us today, and your willingness to be our "First Person", and, in fact, coming all the way from Chicago, to do this with us.

So thank you, very much. We have such a short period together. So -- and you have -- you could talk to us, for the next week.

And we would still feel we only got a glimpse of what you had to say, but we'll get as much as we can in our hour.

You were -- you were ten years old, living in Warsaw, when World War II began, with Germany's invasion of Poland, in September 1939.

Before we turn to the War, and to the Holocaust, and all that you and your family went through -- start, first, by just telling us some about you and your family in had years before the war.

>>ESTELLE: I was born in Warsaw, Poland, to a middle-class family.

Though, there was -- there were outbursts of anti-Semitism in Poland before the War.

Still, Warsaw grows in my selective memory, engulfed in radiance of lilac trees against open blue skies, rich sounds of good neighbors; kindness, and trust, and love.

Magic train rides to the countryside. In the summer. All these memories, when I lost everything, became my possession.

BILL BENSON: Thank you, Estelle.

When Germany invaded Poland on September 1st, starting the second world war, they quickly attacked Warsaw, and Warsaw held out for a month. You wrote in your book that "after the German army marched into Warsaw on October 1st, 1939, quote, immediately my life changed beyond imagination."

Will you say more about that

>>ESTELLE: Yes, immediately our lives changed beyond our imagination.

My once peaceful streets were now patrolled by foreign soldiers. They snapped whips in our homes and streets, shouting insults, and contempt. They isolated, us, in a tiny ghetto.

And built a thick wall around us, they filled the ghetto with people. Driven out from surrounding areas.

Most came without a penny in their pockets. Often without shoes on their feet.

Most people died of cold, and starvation.

The ghetto was so, so tiny.

400,000 people, were concentrated in just a few streets.

People covered, the bodies of dead children, with posters saying "children are the holiest things. Our children must live."

Yet, in this inferno, people heroic ways to hold on to their humanity.

Immediately, the Jewish community organized itself; in far-reaching aid center, helping those who were the neediest amongst us.

To own a book, was an act of defiance, and many defied. My father, kept a stash of his favorite books nights when those blinded with covers to keep our existence secret. In a small room -- illuminated by a carbide light, we had no electricity, it was cut off. My father would pull out his books. By his favorite Yiddish authors.

Isaac -- and he read to us, bringing to life, remote worlds. Suffering over our heads did not stop us from celebrating holidays, we pulled our window shades down and that was enough. To own a book -- to -- we even had theaters. Imagine theaters when there was no bread.

There was a wonderful writer, in the Warsaw ghetto. He was a historian, and his name was Chaim Kaplan, and he said that it is incredible that, when we don't think to need it at all, we need poetry more than we need bread.

And I think that is right.

I think that our ability to think for ourselves, and not follow like blind horse -- our ability to create, to express ourselves, is our Godliness.

And all over the ghetto, in cold rooms, teachers met, unemployed, heroic teachers, met with children in cold rooms, and taught them to hold onto their

imaginations and trust and love

BILL BENSON: Estelle, will you tell us in light of that about the teachers, will you tell us just a little bit about Pani Marisia, if I'm saying the name right a teacher of yours.

>> Pani Marisia, down the street from where we lived, behind a fence, behind a -- -- bushes, there was a little house, where Pani Marisia, had a room, a secret room, where we would walk, into -- there were, like, eight of us -- and -- and she -- there were teacher aids, materials, and she, created a world for us of imagination.

Of trust.

Of -- as a matter of fact, when I later became a teacher, she was my role model. Because she used the children's language, and the children's experiences, which is really, the most -- most -- the closest, in teaching language arts, and teaching -- she made us aware of the sky, of each other, and the world became -- became so alive.

And so, yes, she was my role model

BILL BENSON: Your role model.

>> Yes

BILL BENSON: In the midst of all that you've just described, how did your family manage to make ends meet, to eat? Even though, food was very scarce, how did you manage --

>>ESTELLE: There was absolutely, such starvation.

I believe that we were allowed something like 181 calories, per day.

Which, apparently, is less than 10% of the minimum required calorie intake.

But, you know, the resourcefulness of human beings, is very admirable; and very inspiring.

And there was a -- a vigorous underground market, black market. And little children would -- would remove bricks -- at the bottom of the -- of the wall, and like little mice, children no older than six and eight years old, would crawl under the wall.

And smuggle in potatoes and onions -- if they survived, the family ate.

And -- in addition to that, the wall around us had gates that were guarded very strictly.

But the Nazi soldiers, lined their pockets with bribery.

And there were bigtime smugglers, and then the gates would open and some food came in; but there were no stores.

Only -- the stores that sold the rationed food that we got. So there were no stores, places, secret rooms, but most of the people could not afford -- because nobody worked. So most people starved.

It was just a few people. We were fortunate, my father, was a jeweler.

And during the War, gold becomes the most stable currency.

So we did not starve in the ghetto. But -- was littered with -- corpses, yes,
BILL BENSON: The Nazis began deporting Jews, out of Auschwitz -- the ghetto in large numbers in 1942, descending into death camps and concentration camps. For a period of time, your parents managed to keep you from being deported, to keep you safe.

How did they manage to do that?

>>ESTELLE: It was not really safe.

Okay.

So in July 1942, the month of my 13th birthday, things became even more gruesome. This was the beginning of the Warsaw ghetto uprising -- excuse me, the deportation.

We had no inkling that deportations meant death.

So many people marched voluntarily, and unknowingly, to death.

But many people had lived in apartment buildings, where does one hide in an apartment building? Many people tried to hide.

Pretty much in the same places, that children play, hide-and-go-seek, we hid behind beds. We hid behind chairs, between mattresses and box springs, in cupboards and drawers -- anywhere where we could disappear. Some people would pull a wardrobe, in front of a door -- to obscure the door and hide in a secret room.

We hid in a secret room. Everybody in the row of the same apartment covered the same room, hoping this would keep us -- our secret place, less obvious.

From July 1942 until September 1942, not even -- -- 99% of the children, disappeared, the deportations took place with 20th century know-how and stone-age values.

And in these two months, 99% of the children disappeared. I was among the 1% of children still alive.

Can you imagine a world without the sound of children?

Without the presence of grandparents? Grandmothers and grandfathers? Because old people, and children, were among the first to be deported. We never heard from the people who were deported; but a few managed to come back, under the cover of night; and they told us about the horrendous train ride to

a place called Treblinka, where our people were gassed.

I cannot imagine, how anyone, who loves their wives and their children and their mothers, and their friends -- could do such a horrendous thing.

This is why I am sharing, this very difficult story.

And I think that this is why you are here, to be reminded, that human beings, are capable of tremendous evil.

And in that recognition, appreciate and support so much more; the value of love. We are all one family.

If one person in the family suffers, everyone suffers.

And that was the --

BILL BENSON: If you don't mind, I would like -- have you tell one more thing, about what you said, about the fact that you were part of the remaining 1% of children.

At some point, the Nazis declared any child under the age of 14 was useless, which hastened the deportation of the kids.

You were 13, what did your mother do?

>>ESTELLE: Yeah, well, I was a complete persona non grata. I was forbidden to live -- my mother, I had a braid, so my mother cut my hair up, dressed me up to look older.

And I was very frightened, and I asked my father what would he do? What would happen if they found out that I was only 13, not 14?

And my father said, "I will burn their eyes out with acid. I won't let them touch you."

I believed him; that I was safe, if only in his love.

BILL BENSON: Estelle, you were still in the ghetto, when the remarkable Warsaw uprising and the subsequent horrific obliteration of the Warsaw ghetto took place.

Tell us about the Warsaw uprising, and what -- what happened to you, and your family

>>ESTELLE: As soon as the people learned about Treblinka there was no -- made no sense, to wait and hope, that we will hold onto our lives, and the lives of our children.

If we waited until the war was over.

At that point, the people began to organize themselves into armed resistance, but there was only a handful of people left. The ghetto was so -- the buildings, were so empty, there was such silence -- I remember, I would sometimes walk out of the building, and walk across the courtyard, to the gate, and open the gate, and hope to hear, a sound of life; but the silence was so palpable, it was crawling at me.

And I was trapped.

BILL BENSON: About the Warsaw uprising

>>ESTELLE: So at that point, the handful of -- remaining Jewish people began to organize themselves and to armed resistance, my father was a member, and they began to build a bunker -- bunkers, and -- under the basement.

Under the -- in the basement.

My family moved from the second floor apartment, to the basement, in which you build a -- a a bunker -- actually, I am -- was the ground floor and the bunker was in the basement.

And freedom -- the fighters, also, they build -- a network of bunkers, for

entrenchment and for -- what -- and they also, dug tunnels, a network of tunnels between the bunkers for navigation; and they also dug tunnels underneath the wall in order to get to the Christian side and hopefully get arms from the Christian underground.

Events erupted with columns of Nazi soldiers entering the ghetto.

And with -- armored tank cars.

And we had a secret trap door to our bunker, which was the powder room floor and the commode, and all. We lifted the trap door, and walked down, the flimsy ladder into the bunker, pulled the trapdoor down, the walls closed in on me, the ceiling pressed down on me.

The flickering of the carbide light was our only substitute for the sun.

The ticking of the clock, was our only clue when morning was rising... and sun was setting.

How -- how I miss the open, blue horizon, and while we were in the bunker, fighting broke out in the streets.

Facing a 20th century army, armed from head to toe; facing armored cars, and tanks, and bomber planes, with a handful of freedom fighters -- poorly-clad, poorly-armed, poorly-fed -- they climbed up on rooftops.

In front of open windows.

Crawled out of the bunkers -- and the secret tunnels, and stepped in front of tanks.

And Molotov cocktails and whatever arms they had -- you know it is noteworthy that it took the handful of fighters longer to fight, than it took for France or for Poland to capitulate

BILL BENSON: As you described as poorly-armed, poorly-clad, group of

resistance fighters, held off, the might of the German army for a month, but, of course, eventually they began to destroy, building by building; and they got to your building.

What -- how did they discover you?

>>ESTELLE: At some point, a grenade was thrown into our bunker.

And there was not a corner to hide anymore.

They pulled us out into the street; but -- the street, the streets were littered and people -- congealed blood, flames, enormous tons of flames were licking the sky, and painting it, in other-worldly colors of iridescence. Bombs flying all around us.

Smoke, and they marched, us to the deportation stop and loaded us onto freight trains and we ended up in the ex-termination camp, where the electrified barbed wire fence marked the end of our horizon.

Where the crematorium was clear in sight. And if that was not enough, for sadism, they had the gallows, in the middle of the assembly field, where innocent people were dangling from gibbets, and my father was gassed there
BILL BENSON: Did that happen almost immediately when the four of you got there

>>ESTELLE: Yes

BILL BENSON: So what happened, then, to your mother and your sister and you? So it's just the three of you?

>>ESTELLE: Well, we did this awful slave labor. We dug, we were made to dig turf. It was completely useless, actually we were housed in the barracks, it was sort of a storage place, we were condemned for the gas chambers.

And -- coincidentally, my sister was beaten by a -- by a woman guard Nazi

guard, very badly

BILL BENSON: A guard

>>ESTELLE: And so the following day, she was not able to move. She was so beaten, she was such a beautiful, gentle, 14-year-old.

And so we hid her under the bunk beds, when we went to work, and she was put on a list, our assumption that anyone who was put on the list was designated for the gas chamber. The three of us had a pact that if one of us would be sent to the gas chamber, all three of us would go.

So the logical thing for my mother, and me, to do, was to trade places, with two other women, who were on the list. And who hoped to see another sunrise.

So the following day, when the names were called.... my mother and sister and I marched absolutely sure that we were -- we were marched to the gas chambers, but as it turned out, they loaded us onto a freight train.

And we ended up in -- in a slave labor camp there was a slight distinction between slave labor camps and ex-termination camps.

The ex-termination camps was a killing factory place.

Skarzysko, we worked in an ammunition factory

BILL BENSON: Before you go on about what it was like there, I have a couple questions about Majdanek, but in particular, you -- of course, you lost your father, if you don't mind, you had a photograph of your father. Will you share that with us? How you lost your photograph?

>>ESTELLE: Right.

So everything was taken away from us.

But I managed to save a photograph of my father, and I hid it under the

lining of the shoe.

And as I was marching to the showers, we were sure that the showers that we were marching to, where we knew about the showers that were gas. And so we were pretty sure that that was the end.

As a matter of fact, when the water was spurting at us, it was chlorinated water.

So it had such a strong gas -- I was sure that was the end, but it wasn't.

But anyway, so I had the picture, of my father, in the lining of my shoe and the Nazi soldiers stopped me.

And he said, "You have something hidden. If you want to live, you'd better give it to me".

I said, "I have nothing! I have nothing".

And he said, "I know you have something!"

So I thought, I might as well, be truthful.

And I thought, the picture would be so meaningless, to him.

So I retrieved the photo, and I said, that's all I have. Is the photo of my father.

Where he snapped it away from me.

BILL BENSON: It was gone

>>ESTELLE: It was gone, right

BILL BENSON: I know we can't spend much more time on it. Any particular part of what you're sharing with us, but you've written about in your book, things that are just -- I want to mention, a couple, if I can.

The work that you mention, meaningless work.

It was to dig up the turf, just dig up patches of turf, and then, others would be replant that same part that was dug up, just over and over and over again.

And then Estelle also shared that, in the bitter cold, they kept themselves warm -- she, her mom, and her sister -- by, literally, blowing on each other.

Blowing warm air

>>ESTELLE: Yes, if you breathe out. If you put your mouth, against -- someone's back, I sometimes do it to my grandchildren (laughing) when they are very cold. And you breathe out, you get a gust of very warm air.

So this is how we kept ourselves

BILL BENSON: As you began to tell us, they took us to Skarzysko

>>ESTELLE: Right

BILL BENSON: Skarzysko, it was different in terms of the work you did

>>ESTELLE: Right

BILL BENSON: Tell us a little bit more about your time in Skarzysko

>>ESTELLE: Well, it was the -- the slave labor camp enclosed by an electrified barbed wire fence, every few feet there were towers with sentries, and soft light. And we worked from sunrise to sun set. Our isolation -- it was all so true, in the next camp, in Czestochowa.

Our isolation, was, so, so, unimaginably dark and thick, I remember when we used -- to work, to walk from work, in the morning, to work to and from work, the only contact we had with life, was a patch of sky.

This patch of sky, was our only connection with life.

With freedom.

And also, on some -- I think -- on a subliminal level, on a subconscious level, it was an affirmation; that under -- in the eye of the universe, in the eye of

G-D, we are all one, and that was reassuring.

And there was another thing:

Also, the fact that....

Your mind in a way is always free.

Even -- even if it -- even if it means what you'll be thinking of, when we were facing death.

Even any of these camps in the utter isolation, where the only contact was, with life -- was that patch of sky, that we only saw a glimmer of.

And also: The ability to think how we are going to face death, even in Majdanek, and even in the other camps -- we conjured up memories of... just the Glory of seeing a new rising sun.

The sanctity of simple moments with family, and people that you love.

You see, we endured, because we held onto our memories, we held onto our love, because we experienced it before, which really also points out the fact, that, it takes a village, to teach people that love exists, and that was -- nurturing
BILL BENSON: May I ask you a few more questions if I can, Estelle?

>>ESTELLE: Sure

BILL BENSON: You had considered for a title for your book, before it became "transcending darkness", "The Three Monkeys", and I think that came from your time at Skarzysko, will you tell us how that came about?

>>ESTELLE: Okay, so we -- my mother was the only mother in all the three camps that I am aware of.

And --

BILL BENSON: That had children with her?

>>ESTELLE: That had children, right, and Majdanek for instance, we were the

only family of three people that I am aware of. Everyone else was alone.

So if we were covered with lice -- so I don't even believe, that we had towels. We had some running water, and very little time to wash.

So we were so filthy. Covered with mange and scabs, and scabs -- and the skin lice, itches and you scratch and your skin gets infected. And we had no medication.

So, we would pick lice like monkeys, and because we were the only family of three, our fellow -- our sister concentration camp inmates called us "The Three Monkeys" affectionately, because in Majdanek, women and men were segregated; and children just did not exist

BILL BENSON: At all, except for the two of you

>>ESTELLE: Right.

BILL BENSON: : Thanks for telling us that. Estelle you went to another camp in the summer of 1944 Czestochowa

>>ESTELLE: Czestochowa was another camp in Poland; and it was also -- we worked in a German ammunition factory

BILL BENSON: And you would be liberated from there

>>ESTELLE: And -- yes, so that was in January, 1945; so that was from 1939 until January 1945.

Suddenly, a miracle! We hear a rumble of planes and we ask ourselves could it be?

And we were liberated.

The following morning.

But I assure you that liberation was not anything like you are likely to

imagine.

It was when the ground was covered with snow, and ice. Poland is quite cold.

And all we had on was a no underwear stockings, wooden clogs and we shuffled out. The camp was enclosed with, like, a no-man's land, and we shuffled out; and we -- were so afraid, it was a ruse. And we hear Russian soldiers.

So we rushed to them.

Like we see in Messiah, and the soldiers held out their hands and said, we still have a war to fight. And they did, because the war was not over until May of 1945.

So, from 1945, to 1947, we were wandering through Poland, through Czechoslovakia, and Germany and I'll explain why we were heading for Germany. We didn't have a penny in our pockets. We had no home to come back to.

We had -- we had no country to go back to.

There was still a lot of anti-Semitism and hostility in Poland.

Although, not everyone -- there were also many, many, very kind people; but there were enough people who showed a lot of hostility, that we felt that we were countryless. And we eventually came to this wonderful country, the United States.

BILL BENSON: Before we turn to a little bit more about that, when you first were liberated, tell us what kind of condition that you and Fredka and your mother were in and how you did manage to get some food, because you -- because you had been in starved conditions.

>>ESTELLE: Well, we were really, pretty much. We were begging, and we

were fortunate -- we were, actually -- what we did, we were wandering. Hopping trains.

Going -- looking for family. At one point -- and I describe it in my book -- at some point, we -- three -- two Russian soldiers, gave us shelter. And it was -- it's amazing how much suffering, a human being can endure.

And remain human. You know, we survived with love for humanity; with compassion; and with joy of life. Life should be lived, joyfully.

I think it is important to remember that suffering, does not have to drive you to anger and despair, that it can teach you -- to love more deeply and to be compassionate.

BILL BENSON: Can you say a little bit more -- you've already told us I think what it took for you to endure, if you want to say just a little bit more about how, the three of you, got through all of that. I mean, what you've described is horrific. But when you read your book, and go into so much more details -- you know, for most of us, it's beyond our imagination.

How do you think you managed to survive through all that

>>ESTELLE: I -- to endure, you had to hold onto your memories. You held onto to the love that you knew. And it was, you know, -- it was almost, like, the patch of sky. That reminded you of that humanity is one.

And it was memories of love at home; that you got -- and my mother told us in the crematorium, she said, the world has a conscience, and we thought she was out of her mind in front of the crematorium, and she said, you'll see. If we'll survive you'll see that the Nazi's children and their children's children, for generations, will be asking, how it could have happened? How could it have

happened, in a country, a highly-literate country? And you know what? My mother was right.

The people in Germany are asking how could it have happened?

I am so grateful for that, because I feel that understanding is a responsibility.

I think that redemption comes with understanding, because, unless you understand.... you will not advance.

And I think that we are all left with the legacy to understand that human beings are capable of nobility. And -- and cruelty

BILL BENSON: One more question, for you, Estelle -- I think we have time to turn to our audience for questions

>>ESTELLE: I'm looking forward to that

BILL BENSON: One more for you, from me... you mentioned the importance of the patch of blue sky that you could see. We have a new exhibit in the museum, which is called 1,00078 blue skies. Tell us about the significance of that for you.

>>ESTELLE: That exhibit, touches me very deeply.

And it's very interesting, the exhibit, there are 1,078 photos of skies, in the various concentration camps

BILL BENSON: 1,078 camps.

>>ESTELLE: It touches me, because of the affirmation of life.

That I felt, when I looked at the sky.

And when you look at the individual, photos of the sky, in a way, you are reminded, that, we are all individuals, yet we are all united.

We are all one.

In the eye of the Divine, and in the eye of the Universe.

And -- and so, I think, that -- and unity is love.

And that is -- the healing thing -- that is what will keep the civilization advancing.

BILL BENSON: And I hope to get a chance, you know, it's very simple. I hope you get a chance to see it.

So we -- we have time for a few questions, from our audience.

We have two microphones, one in each aisle, we do ask that you go to the microphone to ask you question.

Please try to make the question as brief as you can.

And I will repeat it, just to be sure that we hear it right. So that Estelle can respond to it. Hopefully someone has a question, but if not I probably will ask many, many more, but I'm going to hold off. Here we go.

>>ESTELLE: I'm looking forward to your questions.

>> Q: My question was, when you were in -- in the different camps, you always had Nazi guards -- were they -- were there any times, where you saw, where the Nazi guards were actually -- felt sorry or felt bad for what they were doing and they were doing it because they had to? Or were they all pretty much just evil people?

BILL BENSON: The question is in the various camps that you were in, did you see any instance, where the soldiers, the guards, the Nazi guards were maybe felt sorry, for you, or felt bad, as opposed to just being completely evil? Were there any -- any examples of that in your mind?

>> A: I have not seen any soldiers had the courage to show kindness. But I absolutely believe that there was goodness in them. I absolutely -- you know, they had faces like my face.

I have to see my humanity in their humanity.

I have to believe that there was some goodness, in them. And that is my hope.

BILL BENSON: While we're waiting to see if anybody else has a question, I take advantage and ask another one, if I can.

I want you to go back -- this is, I believe, when you were on your way -- I believe Skarzysko, you were on the train.

And the train stopped.

And that incident ended up possibly saving your life.

It had to do with a -- where the train was going, and there was a -- will you share that?

>>ESTELLE: Yeah, the randomness of luck.

Those who survived, were not any braver or any -- any more clever than the others. But a lot of it depended on randomness, and the -- random situation was that the train stop for a pit stop and we left the train, and then when we came back to get on the train, we walked into a different car, and that car ended up, to -- in a place, in Skarzysko, that was less, less perilous,

BILL BENSON: Just -- you got on the wrong car

>>ESTELLE: Yeah

BILL BENSON: We have a question here.

FROM THE FLOOR: >> Q: You said that when you were moving, you were moving out of Poland, and through Czechoslovakia and into Germany it looks like you moved from Germany to the U.S., so kind of why did you take the path that you took? And why were you heading to Germany?

BILL BENSON: The question is, when you were liberated and as -- you went

many places, but headed towards Czechoslovakia, then Germany.

Why did you go to Germany?

>> A: Right. Yes, I forgot to mention the reason for it. We went to Germany, because the -- the sect- -- Germany was -- American forces were in Germany.

And we our dream was to come to the United States to a country, that does not define the citizenship of a person, by religion; while we were -- Poland was my country. It was my world.

But I was Jewish.

So I was -- I was not defined -- although, this was my only world that I knew.

And this country, this was our hope to come here, my mother had here two sisters and a brother. So eventually, we established contact, and we came here; and I see --

BILL BENSON: You do, you have another one right here.

>> Q. Hi, Estelle. I was wondering, speak about healing, are you able to forgive what happened to you?

BILL BENSON: The question is are you able to forgive, in your healing

>>ESTELLE: I have a very hard time understanding fully, the meaning of forgiveness.

If forgiveness means not to carry bitterness, not to hate -- I feel hatred, an eye for an eye, and we'll all be blind. I believe that the only way, to deal with hate, is love.

So, I -- but I do -- I do feel -- I'm not sure I can forgive. Who am I to forgive for the other people? I'm not sure I can forgive for the loss of childhood,

that I suffered; but I carry no bitterness, I carry sadness about it; but -- so that's -- this is my response.

FROM THE FLOOR: Thank you

BILL BENSON: With your blessing --

>>ESTELLE: I see another one.

[LAUGHTER]

BILL BENSON: Okay. She wants the questions!

[LAUGHTER] >> Q: Thank you for sharing your story. I am from South Korea.

So, this is a visit it me here, my question is, actually, I am working as a teacher, in the elementary level.

So, I have a question, about what's the most essential lesson to your students, when you were a teacher? Related to your experience which you told us today? What was the essential lesson to your students?

BILL BENSON: What was the -- if I'm understanding correctly you're a teacher from South Korea, or teaching in South Korea now?

>> There.

BILL BENSON: Yeah, the question is as a teacher, what is the essential lesson -- you, drawing on your experience, that you felt you were teaching; is that a fair way of putting it.

FROM THE FLOOR: Yes.

>>ESTELLE: I think the experience was -- the dignity, and the words of each individual, the humanity, and us, the faith in the creative abilities that we have.

And using the children's language, to teach language arts -- talking -- stimulating, asking questions -- hearing -- hearing children share

their experiences, and their feelings.

And the humanity in us; the creativity in us.

BILL BENSON: Thank you, thank you.

I'm going to turn back to Estelle in just a moment to close our program.

Before I do, I want to do a couple of things: One is, I want to share with you, if I can, something that Estelle has written in her book.

Because I think, this is just an amazing statement.

Quote, our survival depended 99% on random luck; and 1% on instinct and grit. Without the 1% pluck you were 100% dead. I think that's just a powerful, powerful statement. Thank you for being with us, we have two more programs left, next Wednesday and Thursday, we end our 2019 year of "First Person". We'll resume again next March, 2020. All of our programs are available on the museum's YouTube page; so Estelle's will be posted within the next couple of weeks. But you can also see our other programs. So if you don't have the chance to come back, we hope that you can join us, electronically.

It's our tradition at "First Person", that our "First Person", gets the last word.

And so I'm going to turn back to Estelle to close it. I'm going to ask you to hold on the question, again, and one other comment. When Estelle finishes our photographer Joel is going to come up on the stage and he's going to take a photograph of Estelle with you as the audience as the background. So please stay with us for that as well.

So Estelle, I would like to turn back to you to close our program

>>ESTELLE: I thank you so very much, all, for being here. It is so difficult to talk about the subject, because it generates such pain.

And it's so difficult to listen to it.

Yet, we have to be reminded, from time to time, of the consequences to us, and to humanity when we accommodate ourselves to tyrants; how it corrupts the conscience of a nation. What it does to love, and trust.

It is noteworthy, that it took Hitler a mere 14 years to turn the Weimar democracy into a police state.

As long as there are people who are saying that the Holocaust never happened -- and as long as genocides are still happening today, some way, the Holocaust is still with us.

I am so grateful for the existence of this museum.

And for keeping the memory alive so that we don't let it happen again, and I so much appreciate your being here, and for caring.... and thank you, so very much.

[APPLAUSE]

(Estelle Laughlin, August 1st, 2019.)