

[MIXED CONVERSATIONS] Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson, and I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. Thank you for joining us today. We are in our seventh season of First Person. Our "first person" today is Mrs. Sheila Bernard, whom we shall meet shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand experiences associated with the Holocaust. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum.

This is our final First Person program of the 2006 season. The museum's website, which is www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- will provide information about First Person in 2007, which we expect to begin in March of next year and continue through August of 2007.

This 2006 season of First Person has been made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Dora Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring First Person, and like to let you all know that Mr. Louis Smith is here with us today. Lou.

Welcome.

[APPLAUSE]

Sheila Bernard will share with us her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Sheila some questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have several requests of you. We ask first that, if possible, please stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions for Sheila as she speaks.

Second, during the question and answer period, if you have a question-- and we hope you will-- please make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so all in the room can hear it, including Sheila, and then she'll respond to your question.

If you have a cell phone or pager that's still on, if you wouldn't mind, please turn that off.

I would also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition today know they are good for the balance of the afternoon. So you can stay with us till 2 o'clock and still get into the permanent exhibition.

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims. 6 million were murdered. Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

What you are about to hear from Sheila Bernard is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Sheila's introduction.

We start with this photograph of Sheila Bernard, born Sala Perc. Sheila was the only child born to Bela and Isaac Perc. Sheila was born in 1936 in Poland. The arrow on this map points to Poland. And then, on this map of Poland, the arrow points to the approximate location of Chelm, Sheila's hometown.

Sheila's family owned a large building on Lubelska Street, and her father managed a Singer sewing machine business. Here we see Sheila and her mother in this photograph.

Sheila came from a large religious extended family. Pictured here is Sheila's grandfather. This photograph is of Sheila's mother and her siblings, and it was taken in 1928. In this next photograph, taken in 1936, Sheila's parents and mother's

family visit their mother's grave.

When the ghetto was created in Chelm, Sheila's family was forced to move into it. The arrow points to the approximate location of Chelm.

Hearing that Jewish men were to be killed, Sheila's father attempted to escape to Russia. Hearing then that the Nazis planned to kill all Jews, Sheila's father attempted to return to Chelm, but was murdered by the Germans.

Sheila and her mother managed to escape from the ghetto with help from a family friend. Sheila and her mother spent two years in hiding.

Within a year of the war's end, Sheila's mother died. An agency locating Jewish orphans found Sheila and took care of her in Dornstadt, Germany for two years. The arrow points to the approximate location of Dornstadt.

In 1947, at the age of 11, Sheila immigrated to Israel. Sheila married, and she and her husband had her daughter in Israel. She immigrated to the United States in 1963. And we close the slide presentation with this contemporary photo of Sheila.

Sheila has lived in the United States since 1963, as I mentioned. Once here, she continued her nursing career, spending eight years in New York before moving to the Washington, DC area in 1971 to live in Maryland. Sheila was a nurse at several hospitals in the area and retired from Holy Cross Hospital in Silver Spring, Maryland in 1998. Her husband passed away in 1980.

They have a daughter, Nira, who was born in Israel. She has two children, ages 15 and a half and 17 and a half. Her granddaughter is just beginning her freshman year of college in Pennsylvania. And her grandson, Brandon, is with us today. Brandon, if you wouldn't mind letting folks know you're here.

[APPLAUSE]

I'd also like to mention that Sheila's cousin, Sam Frucht, is also with us today as well. Sam, let folks know you're here.

[APPLAUSE]

You will find Sheila here on Thursdays when she helps to staff the donor's desk. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our "first person." Mrs. Sheila Bernard.

[APPLAUSE]

Just slide this in close so [INAUDIBLE] there.

OK.

Sheila, welcome, and thank you so much for being willing to be our "first person" today.

Thank you.

Let's get started. And I suggest, why don't we start today with perhaps some-- you telling us a little bit about your family, your community, and your life to the extent that you know, because you were so young in the years before the war.

As you mentioned before, I-- we lived in Chelm. My family was very well off. And we've been-- my father had a business. And we owned a very big building. It was-- and the front was on Lubelska Street, which was the main street of the-- and the back was where the ghetto was later.

And there was-- the building went all around. And in the middle, there was a courtyard where sometimes the horses came in with the buggies. And it was a cobblestone.

We had a very large family. And my first years been wonderful. And we used to go on vacation. And we went on the vacation. The last thing I remember, we went to the country. In a farm, we stayed.

And while we been there, while we having such a wonderful time, we heard the war started.

While you were actually away on vacation.

Yes, we actually been on vacation when the war started.

I remember, we couldn't come back, because the trains was not running. So we had to walk. My father carried me on his back. And we walked for a long time. Then, finally, we found somebody with a horse and buggy, and we end up coming to Chelm.

And at first the Russian been there for a while, for a short time. And then the German attacked. And they chased the Russian out. And only-- and they took over.

So first, Sheila, the first attack was the Russians attacking. And then they're there for a while.

Yes.

And then now the Germans have pushed them out.

Right, for a short time. The only thing I remember is the shooting and the bombs flying.

But you do remember that.

That I remember. But after the Russian left, also there was shooting for a while until the German took over.

And as soon as the German came, our life change immediately. All the Jews had to move into the ghetto. And our building, which was very large, the back of it was by the ghetto, close to the ghetto. So we end up moving there to the-- into a small apartment. And we had to stay with my aunt, and her husband, and her three children, and my mother and me and my father. We all moved into a small apartment there.

Life got very, very difficult.

And not only did you move there, but all the Jews from Chelm--

All the Jews--

--forced into the same ghetto.

--moved to that ghetto, which is a closed-in area where only for Jews. And you couldn't get out unless you had a special permit for work. But otherwise, it was closed.

So we had to wear a yellow star. And we had to-- just was difficult to-- food was scared. And things got very, very bad.

The rumor was at first that they killing only the men. So my father and some other men got organized, and they decided to run away to Russia. And I remember sitting upstairs in our apartment, which was on the second floor. And I saw my father with my mother kissing. And he left on the horse with buggy, with some other men, going for Russia.

But he never made it there, because he heard they're killing everybody else-- the children and women. So he decided to

go back and to get us.

But on the way back, he stopped in-- at my uncle's house, here who lived in Lwów at that time. And exactly when he stopped there the German raided the place, and attacked and shot my uncle, and my father, and my uncle's wife. They all been shot. They tried to run away, but they couldn't because they'd been killed.

So that's-- we lived in the ghetto. My mother was-- try to manage to find some food for us by selling her clothes or whatever she had left-- jewelry or fur. And I remember that we had a Polish policeman, who was a friend of the family, also knew my father and even my grandfather. And he used to come and help to sell some stuff for my mother so she will have some money.

So he could take it outside the ghetto and sell it.

He could take it out because he was Polish. And--

Sheila, let me just ask you a couple of questions before you continue. Did your mother know what happened to your father?

Yes. Well, some people must have come back, and they told her what happened. That's what I heard from my mother. And, as I said, my mother was-- one time I remember she was-- bought two sacks of flour and-- to sell for baking bread. She was selling them. And suddenly, the German came, and they knocked on the door, and found the flours.

And so they took my mother to jail. It was a Jewish jail with a Jewish policeman who had been established in the ghetto. And they was going to send her the next day to the concentration camp to be killed.

My cousin, who was at that time 12, she ran to that Polish policeman, Czyzyk, and told him. And he came immediately. And he came to jail.

And because he was a Polish policeman, he had more authorities over the Jewish policemen. So he got my mother out of jail at that time. And that's how she survived.

So having the flour was considered like contraband.

You couldn't sell anything. You couldn't have any business or anything. But my mother was pretty entrepreneur, was trying to make some money. And she was caught at that time. But thank god the Jewish-- that Polack, Czyzyk, got out from that time.

We continued living there. And then the German made all the young people, or able to work, to go to work for them, slave labor, without pay. Just maybe sometime they give some food. They used to take her out every morning.

And I used to stay with my aunt, who was babysitting her children. And she had two children, twins, and Chaya and Bracha. And there was another little girl my age, close to my age. And other children from the neighborhood.

And the Germans came at that time. And they called it an Aktion, where they raided all the houses. And whoever they found that didn't have the right papers, or didn't have-- or children, or older people, they used to shot them and kill them just on the spot in the street.

So they came to our house. And my aunt showed them the papers, but they didn't care. So they shot her, my aunt. And she fell down. Itta was her name, and fell down on the stairs, and rolled down, and she died.

Then they shot a few children--

And she was actually taking care of all the kids when they came in.

Yes, she did. And they shot a few kids after that.

And then they-- it was my turn to be shot. So they took me on-- another friend, a boy who was there, my age, a neighbor. And we were supposed to go. They called us to come down the stairs.

And you knew what had happened to your aunt already?

Yes, I saw it. Yes.

You saw it. OK.

And they took-- we walked down. And that boy became very hysterical. He started laughing very loud. And I was crying very hard. So it was a very funny picture for them that he was laughing while we'd been going down, and I was crying.

And the Germans was standing on the side. They thought it was very funny. They started laughing.

And that officer, the German officer who stood downstairs, he said, well, we kill so many Jews today. Let them go.

So they let us go. And we ran upstairs. And they left that day. That's how we survived that day.

They came a few other times. They raided the place. They looked in the houses. But we learned to hide. There was a secret closet under the stairs that you couldn't tell from outside. We've been hiding in the closet under the stairs.

The other time, we've been hiding on the roof, which it was on top of the little shed in the backyard inside, where they kept horses sometimes. So there was a little attic in the roof. And we been hiding there.

So during that time, your mother would have to go to the work that she was forced to do. And since your aunt was now gone, you were there alone and had to hide.

Yes, we had alone. And we-- I was about six years old then.

But eventually, my mother got very afraid. She didn't know what to do-- leave me alone. So she paid a Jewish policeman to sneak me out from the ghetto to where she was working.

So I remember early, early in the morning, it was still dark. We got out. We walked near the houses very quietly. And we got out to the-- well, it was a field where my mother lived-- worked there. They'd been digging ditches. That was their job. I don't know why they dug the ditches, but that's what they did. And she told me to hide in the bushes and in the tall grass that was around there.

So that's where I was for a few months. We've been kind of-- in the bushes. Every day I was there. It was cold first, and then it was hot. And sometime it rained.

So here you're this little girl hiding in tall grass while your mother is digging ditches.

Right, and working very hard.

Then, somehow, she managed to move-- to be moved to a factory. And she worked in that factory. They made some parts. I don't know. And what kind, I don't remember.

And then we've been hiding in the roof of the factory, on the top. There was an attic. And they had little windows. And that's why I've been hiding while she was walking downstairs. It must have been, like, the fifth floor or something on the attic.

And the German used to come and look for Jews in the area. But they wouldn't touch the people who worked. But they been looking for others. And whoever was in charge on the factory, they knew that we are hiding there.

And I remember, if I remember right, that was actually, you said it was a German manager.

Yes, it was a German manager. My mother called him that he is a good German. That was the good German. And he let us stay there, and didn't ever told the Gestapo where we are.

Hidden up in the attic.

Up in the attic.

Wow.

He didn't do anything or didn't give us food, but he just let us stay there.

There's more than you?

Yeah, there was a few kids, others, that had been hiding there, which I don't remember how many. But there must have been, like, six or seven of us. And that their parents worked downstairs.

And I think you mentioned to me that you could actually look through cracks in the floor and see the Nazis coming through, looking for--

Yes, we did look through the cracks, and we saw the Nazis walking downstairs with their boots, marching. And it was so scary to us, the marching downstairs in this-- near the factory, everywhere looking for children, always looking for somebody that is Jewish.

And your mother must have just been in constant terror that you were going to be exposed, obviously. So at some point, she then made a decision that she needed to do something even more significant.

Yes.

Tell us about that.

Well, my-- one evening, the Jewish policeman, when we-- came over to us. And he said that they're going to close the ghetto and they're going to send all the Jews to concentration camp or kill them on a march. And he said that will be the end of the ghetto here. And because he was a Jewish-- a Polish policeman, he knew things that was going to happen.

And he was the one that had been the family friend?

Yes. His name was Czyzyk. I also want to mention that he was sick, and he knew he had cancer. And he wanted to do something good before he died. He didn't know how long he has to live. But he said, I already did so many bad thing as a policeman in my life. I want to do something good and help people.

So he told my mother that she should come to his house and stay there. My mother wouldn't go without me. So after some discussion, he decided to take me too. So the-- late at night, we got double clothes, everything we could carry, blankets and anything that we could carry with us. We sneaked out from the ghetto. And we walked quietly in the dark to his house.

His house was at the end of the town, close where the Germans used to live. Also, there was farms around. And because he was a Polish policeman, and lived closer to the German, they never checked his house.

So we stayed there for a few-- about a week or two. His wife was very unhappy. She did not want us there. She first--

and she was afraid that if they catch us she would be also deported to the concentration camp. So she was so afraid that she sent her kids away to the farm, somewhere where her brother lived. And she stayed for a while.

And while we been there, my two cousins, who still been alive at that time, Bracha and Sara, they came over. They knew where he lived. And they ask if they can be also come in there. And his wife would not let them in. She chased them away.

And they were young, weren't they?

They've been young. One was about six, my age. The other one was 12. They'd been chased away. My other cousin was already killed. Most of my family was killed by that time.

And we saw them through the window, through the crack that-- how they walking away. And we cried. My mother and I were sitting and crying. We knew this is the last time we ever see them. We will never see them again.

By that time, after that, they'd been killed. And we never saw them, of course. And then most of my family-- all of it, actually-- was killed by that time.

I just want to say that they tried to get out from Poland. They tried to get visas to get-- to go to United State. But United State would not let them in. Nobody would let them in.

They tried to go to Palestine. At that time it was called Palestine. And they, over there there was the English in charge. They called it the Mandate. And they wouldn't let them in there to Israel. There was a quota, that so many Jews every year could go-- get in. And a very small amount. And the same thing United State and other countries, had quotas that--

And they wouldn't-- so they couldn't get in anywhere. So they stayed.

And this was your parents, right?

My parents, and my uncles, and other people. My mother told me they tried. But it was-- they wouldn't let them in.

And you actually had some relatives--

Yes, I had a uncle.

--elsewhere.

I had three uncles in Israel. And I had an uncle, two uncles in the United States.

But because of the quotas, you still could not get in.

Because of the quota, we couldn't get in anywhere. And of course, my mother had a large family, with a lot of brothers and sisters. They've been all killed. Everybody was killed during the war who was in Poland. Everybody else who was outside of Poland survived. There was one cousin who went to Russia, and he survived. And other people, uncles.

I was then in--

Now it's the two of you that are left in Czyzyk's house.

Yeah, in Czyzyk's house. Oh, and his wife did not want us in the house. He made a big fuss about it. So we had to move out.

They put us in a-- he put us in a shed where they kept potatoes. It's actually a bunker. They kept potatoes for the winter. And that's why we stayed there for about two or three months. And it got very, very cold there in the shed, in the

bunker.

So next to his house, he had a little chicken shed, chicken coop, where he kept chicken and wood for the winter laying there. So he transfers us there. He made a corner for us in that chicken coop, and with our blankets, with the board, with everything, that's where we slept.

I was there like a prisoner for two years--

In this little--

In this little shed--

--chicken coop, basically.

Chicken coop. And nobody-- and I could not get in-- get out anywhere. I stayed in that shed the whole time. I was there from age six till age almost eight.

It had to be unbelievably cold in there.

Yeah, it was cold in the winter, terribly cold. We covered ourself with all our clothes and everything. In the summer it was hot.

In fact, I think you told me that when it got so cold, you would be fully clothed and then pile every bit of excess, like a blanket that you had.

Yes, blankets, everything we had, we covered. And we hugged real close to each other. So somehow the winters-- it was snowed a lot in Poland. It's very cold, colder than here.

What did you do for food?

He used to-- Czyzyk used to come every day and bring us a loaf of bread. I remember a dark loaf, about 1 kilo, and a bottle of water. And we used to split it in half, cut it in half. I ate, and half my mother.

And once in a while he used to cook soup. And he used to bring us some soup. That was a special treat for us.

There was nothing to do there in the shed. I was-- didn't have no pencils, no paper, no toys, nothing. The only thing I was playing with, the pieces of wood that was laying around on the floor.

And through the shed there was little cracks. So I was able to see what was going on outside. I saw the German walking, because it was close to the German section. And I saw some kids playing. And that was my entertainment, looking through the cracks. It was really very, very boring. But we didn't have anything.

And also we had to-- I had to be very, very quiet. I couldn't talk much during the day, in case somebody will hear us.

In the back of that shed, there was fields of potatoes where they used-- the farmers used to go. And at the end of the day, every day, they used to roast the potatoes on a fire and eat them. And--

Behind your shed.

Behind the shed. And I could see it, and smell the potatoes, and the smell was so good. But I could never had anything.

And I couldn't raise my voice or ask for anything. So until today, I love roasted potatoes because of that. It just reminds me.

So literally, I mean, you lived essentially on bread and water for the better part of for two years.

Yes, for two years--

For two years.

--we're in his-- in the shed and next to his house.

Did you ever leave the shed during those times?

I never left the shed.

You never left the shed.

My mother used to sneak out once in a while at night to empty the pot and clean. And that's the-- late at night. But that's all. But I was never allowed to leave the place.

Czyzyk got very sick. And sometime, when he had to go away on business, we didn't get food that day.

So his wife would not bring it.

His wife will not bring us anything. So we had to starve the whole day. And especially it was difficult when we didn't have water.

And he got very sick. And his wife left him. And-- at the end of the war. And eventually he couldn't walk. So my mother used to sneak out at night to help him a little bit in the house.

Then, suddenly, we heard shooting and bombs flying. And the Russian attacked. And finally, the war came to the end, and the Russian came. And that was like a savior for us, that the Russian came.

And this was probably somewhere around February of 1945?

'45, yeah. No, before that, must have, maybe. '44, I think. At that area.

So you were liberated by the Russians.

By the Russians. And the-- by that time, Czyzyk couldn't walk, and he was in bed. My mother moved to the house to help him. And that was the first time I went out of the shed, and the first time I went in the street.

And everybody must have thought I was crazy, because the way I was looking at everybody, and seeing things for the first time in so many years. I was suddenly able to walk in the street, and see people walking. And I was looking.

And right away, they knew that I was Jewish. And they called me, oh, there is a [POLISH]-- that's Jew in Polish-- walking. And they hated the Jews, the Polack. Till today, they hate the Jews.

So it wasn't celebrating the fact that you'd been hiding, and now you're out.

No. Well, it was celebrating that I was free, suddenly. I could go.

I mean, you were celebrating--

But not them.

Not the people around.

No, they didn't like to see any Jews.

And two weeks after the war, Czyzyk died. And when he died, my mother and I moved out. And my mother somehow managed to get a small room where we stayed. And there was also a few other Jews who came back from hiding in the woods, or they came back from Russia, that used to live in Chelm. So they tried to find their families.

And so my mother used to cook for them because there was no place to eat. And whoever wanted to come, she used to-- and she managed to cook. And she was working very, very hard.

And after a while, we-- she went to the Russian authorities, and finally got permission to move into the one room in the apartment that we lived. And she worked very hard pulling the few things that we had, that she bought a closet, I remember. She was pulling it all by herself. And a table. And she worked so hard, and it was malnourished and weak.

She got a blood clot in her leg.

A blood clot?

Yes, in the upper part of her leg. A phlebitis, they call it. And she had terrible pain in that leg. She couldn't walk. She had to-- she was just laying in bed and couldn't-- every time she moved, she had pain.

I was started to go, at that time, already to school. She put me in the first grade. I was about almost seven and a half or eight years old. And the Polacks-- the children did not like me, and they called me [POLISH]. And I really hated to go to school, but my mother at that time forced me to go. So I used to go.

And anyway, my mother got sicker. So they decided, one of the Jewish men, to call a Polish doctor. They couldn't find any Jewish doctor at that time. So the Polish doctor came.

And he checked her out. And he started exercising her leg, raising it up and down, up and down, doing all kinds of exercises with her leg. I don't know if he didn't know what was wrong with her, or he did it on purpose.

Anyway, the clot started moving, and it moved up to her heart. And two days later, she died from the blood clot. I was, by that time, eight years old. She died in February 1945.

And now you're entirely alone.

I was all alone. And they buried her in the cemetery. They didn't have enough money to make write on the stones. So they just, somehow, they got a stone.

And the cemetery at that time was intact. All the stones from my grandparents and others had been still there, because I was there, and I saw it. But later on, they'd been destroyed by the Polish people.

It was a Jewish cemetery.

It was a Jewish cemetery. And I know most of the stones are gone. The only one I found, some school went back to Chelm, and they tried to restore the cemeteries, and they found my mother's grave. It was written her name. I guess some, later on, they put her name on it.

I was left alone. And there was a young couple that knew my mother, who came back from hiding in the wood. And they took me in. I stayed with them. I continue going to finish first grade. I went in the second grade. And I was living with them. It was kind of lonely. But those other-- finally found two other girls who came back, Jewish, and made some friends.

After a while, there was, from United State, they send-- what do they call it? Shlichim, representative, that was looking

for children survivor in Poland. And one of them came to our town, and he found me, and he took me to Germany, to a place called Dornstadt, near [INAUDIBLE].

And as soon as I got there, I was writing to my uncle in Israel, and also in the United State, my Uncle Ralph. I wrote him where I am, in Polish, of course.

Had your mother, before she died, had your mother given you their addresses so that you knew.

Yes, she did give me the address. So I knew--

So you knew where they were.

--where they lived.

And of course, they start right away to arrange for visas to get me in. But it took a long time because of the English in Israel at that time, they wouldn't let the-- only a certain quota, and I had to wait. It took me about two years till finally I got a visa to go to Israel, to America. The visa came later. But I already left to go to Israel.

So you were trying to go to either place, whichever place--

Either place. But the visa to Israel where it came first.

Tell us about your life in Dornstadt when you got there.

Actually, that was the first place that I felt free. And there was-- we lived in a castle. They must have rented a castle. And-- the Jewish organization. And there was-- it was beautiful. There was grass, and greenery all around. There was trees. And the first time I was running on the hills with the-- and feeling free.

And we always-- of course, we used to get together and have food, eat dinner. But we also had some-- a little bit classes, a little history. And being free outside, it was the first time I felt wonderful.

And you were there with a number of other orphans as well.

Yeah, probably about 50 other kids that they found.

But all orphaned.

Yeah, all orphans.

We've been together. I must have been one of the younger ones there. The other must have been older. I remember I was the youngest.

And somehow, eventually, the papers came, and-- to go to Israel. And they decided that I'm not strong enough to go. So they sent me to a resort kind of area, sanitarium, to-- because I was very small and skinny at that time.

They wanted I should gain some weight. And so they sent me there for two weeks, where they gave us very good food. And we had some instructors who played with us. And eventually, I was ready to go, they said.

So they attached me to a woman who was going to Israel at that time with her two children, that she survived somehow. And she didn't really want to take care on me, but they asked her to. So I did follow her.

We went to, by train, to Czechoslovakia, and then to France, to Paris, and to Marseilles. And we waited in Marseilles for about a month till we got the papers. The ship arrived. It was a Greek ship. And--

And you continued to stay with her--

Yes.

--and her kids.

We stayed with her in a little motel, in one room. We all slept together.

In Marseilles.

In Marseilles. And finally, I was really impressed there, with seeing the streets, when we walked in the streets. They were very wide and big, and walking one side of the street to the other was-- what looked to me so big and long. It's probably not that big, but I was small. Everything looked big to me.

And then, when the ship came, we went on the ship. It was not too big of a ship. I went in. I was-- legally. I had papers. So we was able to go. Otherwise, if the English caught the ship, and there was no-- there were people who didn't have papers or visas, they used to send them back to Cyprus, where they had a concentration camp there, some camp where they kept all the people who tried to get into Israel. And there was lots of people who tried to get in from-- who survived the war.

Anyway, I, after a week being at sea, which was rough, finally we arrived in Haifa in Israel. And I arrived. And I was left alone. And nobody was there to meet me I guess--

The woman left you alone?

Yes. She left.

So you're standing on the dock, basically, by yourself.

I was standing, basically, on the dock, and nobody was there. My uncle, I guess, didn't know what day I'm coming.

Some men came over and asked me why I'm here. And I said, I'm supposed to go to my uncle. And I showed them. At that time, I spoke Yiddish. So I was able to communicate-- and Polish. And the address of my uncle.

And he took me to the bus where it was. They lived in Petah Tikva. And the bus driver took me there, to Petah Tikva. And he dropped me off in the center of the town, and went into a little store, and told them to call my uncle, who was a policeman at that time, at the-- over there.

And they did call him. And he came right. A big [? door, ?] I remember. He came right away. And he was very happy to see me.

And they took me to my other uncle, Ariel, who was the older from all of them. He kind of the head of the family, thought himself. So they decided I'll stay with him and his wife.

And they-- I stayed there. And they put me in school. I didn't know the language. And they put me in the fifth grade. And I didn't go to school since the second grade. And a new language.

New language and three grades higher. Wow.

[LAUGHTER]

So it was very, very difficult. I couldn't catch up at first. And they wouldn't let me speak Polish anymore. They said I have to learn Hebrew so I don't speak Polish. So it was very difficult.

Then they decided I should be better off being in a kibbutz. So they-- because I might get help in the language and everything. Which was right. I was in a-- went to school there. We used to work early in the morning in the picking pears, I remember, for two hours. And then we went to-- for breakfast, and then we went to classes. And they gave me a tutor.

But I was the only newcomer. Everybody else was born there in Israel, in the kibbutz. So it was a very-- still very hard.

So they decided I should go to Haifa in a place called WIZO, a school for children that came after the war, a special school. And that's where I went.

Like a boarding school?

It's like a boarding school. And I liked it because the first time I was other kids like me. And we run away.

Because when I came to Israel, first I was very shy and very quiet. And I was different than anybody else because at that area where I was there was not other kids like me. And my aunt did not understand why I couldn't learn the language fast enough. And I couldn't be like other kids, be happy and go out. That took me a long time to adjust.

So in Haifa, there was other kids like me. And we-- at that time there was no houses around. It was only woods, chestnut trees. And we used to climb on the trees. And it was just beautiful there.

And I've been there almost six years. I finished school. And then I went to nursing school in Haifa.

And this is graduating from high school at 16. So you're still only 16 years old when you go to nursing school.

Yeah. For two years. And then I graduated. And I went to the military, because in Israel, everybody has to go to the military. So I, after training, they sent me to-- back to south, to where it's-- Eilat. At that time, it was on the Egyptian border, by the Red Sea. There was not-- no houses, nothing. Only it was a military base.

And I was one of them who had to set up a hospital, a military hospital. They put up a huge tent, and with kind of a bed. And we had to bring in equipment and set up the operating room, I remember.

And at that time there was nothing there, just woods. There was no wood. There was only sand-- sand and water. And the water was beautiful, and it was very, very, very hot.

Every two or three months, I used to-- they used to give me a vacation, because the place was so isolated. So I used to fly. They flew us back by military plane back to Tel Aviv.

And one of the times where I was supposed to go back, I decided maybe I'll take the bus. There was bus going once a week to back north. It took about 12 hours for the bus at that time to go there. But at the last minute, I kind of thought of 12 hours sitting in a bus. I decided to go by plane, which only took a half an hour.

So I decided. And I was lucky at that time, because exactly at that time the Arabs attacked the bus, and they killed everybody on the bus.

That very bus that you would have been on.

That very bus that I was supposed to-- I had a ticket already to go. But I survived by going by plane. And-- well, there was the independence war going on, and lots of fighting. And there was not enough food. There was rations on food.

So anyway, eventually, when on my-- one of my vacations going back to Petah Tikva, I met my husband, and we got married. And after I got married, I left the military. And later, about a year and a half later, my daughter was born. Her name is Nira.

And we lived-- I worked at that time. It was called the [NON-ENGLISH], for a short time.

And then my husband decided actually that he wants to go to United State because his mother lived in the United State at that time, and his sister. And he thought it would be better there-- though we've been pretty well off in Israel too. He had a business and he made good money. We had our own house and a car, which was kind of rare at that time to have there.

But we sold everything, and we came here in 1963 to New York. And I didn't like it at all. I wanted to go back. But I couldn't, because we sold everything and it was too difficult.

So we lived first in the Bronx, in a small apartment. And the first, after two weeks, suddenly there was a fire from the bottom. I remember it was Christmas time when the tree on the lower level caught on fire. And I go to the window. There's a big fire coming.

So we ran out through the fire escape. The first time I saw how to go through the fire escape. I didn't know how to go down there.

You hadn't practiced.

No.

[LAUGHTER]

And we didn't have shoes, and no coats, and it was winter, a snow. So I ran back to the apartment. I got coats, and shoes, and boots. And I got so-- smoke by that time got into my apartment. It was so-- so I was coughing and coughing for a long time, until I got rid of.

So that was my experience coming to New York. Eventually--

You would end up--

--it got better. And we moved into a house in Douglaston, Queens. And we lived there.

And then my husband decided to move to Maryland in '71. He wanted to open a business here. And my daughter, we all moved here. And she started going to school here.

And I started working in a hospital, and eventually end up in Holy Cross Hospital. I worked there for 24 years.

So put in--

Two of my friends here.

So you put in a full career at Holy Cross after all that you've described.

Altogether, I worked here for 30 years.

Yeah, wow.

And I retired. And my husband died also, as you said, 1980. And now I live in Bethesda, and I'm retired. And I volunteer here.

Sheila, why don't we-- we have a few minutes. Why don't we turn to our audience and see if they have some questions they'd like to ask you. Sheila, also, so you know, will stay behind for a little while afterwards. So if anybody would like to chat with her over here to the side when we're done, please, absolutely feel free to do that. So if you have a question,

I'll repeat it, and then Sheila will answer it.

Back there. Yes, ma'am.

[INAUDIBLE] is your husband a survivor as well?

The question is, was your husband a survivor as well?

Yes, he survived in Lithuania. He was born in Vilya, and-- Vilna. And he survived in the woods at that time, and with the partisan. And--

With the partisans?

Yeah.

Is that right? Mm-hmm.

But he was young at that time. When he came to Israel, he was only 16, with his mother and his sister.

OK. We have another question? Yes, sir.

In the beginning, you showed pictures, including her when she was very little. How did those pictures come to still be around?

The question is, the pictures that we showed, how did you-- how do you happen to have those photographs from many, many years ago?

I didn't have any photos when I came to Israel. Everything that we had is gone. Those pictures came from my aunt, who lived here, Freida, in Israel. She gave me some of those pictures. And another aunt, uncle gave me another picture. So.

And were sent by your mother, probably?

Yeah, my mother sent them before the war to her brother here.

When I first met Sheila, I had the opportunity to spend some time with her in her home, and we were sitting over the dining room table talking and drinking coffee. And I noticed a very large, beautiful piece of embroidery, a picture embroidered on the wall. And it had the date, I believe, 1935 on it. And so I asked Sheila about it. Tell us about it.

That was done by my mother. It's the only thing I have from my mother left. She embroidered it for the new year, for Jewish New Year, for Rosh ha-Shanah.

And she wrote on it and send it to my Uncle Ralph in the United State. And she wrote on it, from Bela to Ralph in 1935 in Chelm for the happy-- for New Year's. And it's beautiful, big picture embroidered on black velvet. And there was flowers, and peacocks, and all that.

My uncle gave it to me many years ago, Ralph, Uncle Ralph. And I framed it. And I have it hanging on the--

And it's the only thing you have from your mother.

That's the only thing I have from my mother. Nothing was left.

When Sheila told me that, she mentioned, if you don't mind, if you don't mind sharing with us about your mother's wedding band.

Oh, yes. The only thing, when my mother died, I was asking for the wedding band that she had on her finger, if I can keep it. And the people who buried her, who said that they have to sell everything to get money to put up a stone. And they cannot give me anything. So they took the-- they sold the ring and whatever other clothes that she had. So I left with nothing.

Yes, sir.

Yeah, throughout the tremendous ordeal that you went through, there was one bright light, was this gentleman, Czyzyk, this righteous man. Does he have any family left behind? And if so, have you try to get in touch with the gentleman's family?

The question is that this man, Czyzyk, who was the bright light, this righteous man for you, do you know if he has family, and have you ever been able to be in contact with them?

Well, after the war, after he died, his wife used to come and-- to my mother and ask for money, if she could-- if she had, because they didn't have--

The one who would not bring you food when he was away, OK.

Right, the one who didn't.

OK.

So my mother used to give her a few dollars every time. But she didn't have much at that time. She only had enough for food. And so she gave her.

And then I heard that she died. His children I never knew because I never saw them. And they-- and I left Poland, so I never kept in touch with his children. I don't know what happened to them.

We're getting close to the end of our hour, so we're going to wrap up in just a moment. I'd like to just ask another question of Sheila before we do our closing, and that, Sheila, I think, probably everybody in this room is feeling what a remarkable woman your mother must have been. Just--

[APPLAUSE]

I don't need to ask a question. Just say a little bit more about your mom.

My mother was-- thanks to her, I survived, because she was very ingenious, and entrepreneur. She always--

Brave.

--managed-- and very, very brave-- managed to find, somehow, some food, or some money, or hiding, which nobody else kind of-- and she was very smart. [INAUDIBLE].

And she looked very beautiful. She was tall and slim-- though during the war she tried to color her hair blond so she will look Polish. But she had dark hair. And she--

I have something here I want to read.

Absolutely. And let me just say that this is our final program of the 2006 year. So please check the museum's website for information about 2007. If your plans bring you to Washington, or you live here, please come back for our First Person program next year. And Sheila will join us again next year. I'm sure of that.

It's our tradition at First Person that our "first person" has the last word. And so with that, we'll turn to Sheila to close

our program.

I want to also, very important, I want to pay tribute to my mother for her unbelievable courage and in generality in saving us during the war in a most dangerous and difficult time.

Another thing I want to say is, the greatest tribute we can pay to the memories of those who perished in the Holocaust and similar tragedies is never to stop trying to make this a better, humane world, and never forget for us.

Thank you, Sheila.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

And again, please feel free to come and talk with Sheila, if you'd like to, over here. Thank you.

[MIXED CONVERSATIONS]