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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 eighth season of First Person. Our "first person" today is Mrs. Susan Taube, 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" presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum.

With three exceptions we will have a first person program each Wednesday until August 29. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a list of the upcoming First Person guests. Look under the Public Programs section of the website and that'll take you right to the First Person program. This 2007 season of first person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Dora Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring First Person.

Susan Taube will share with us her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask her some questions.

Before you are introduced to Susan, I have several requests of you. First, we hope that, if possible, you can stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions for Susan or the audience during our one-hour program.

Second, if you have a question during our question and answer period-- and we hope you will-- please make it as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so all in the room, including Susan, hear the question, and then she'll respond to your question. And finally, if you have a cell phone or a pager that's still on, please turn it off.

I'd also like to let those of you who have passes for the permanent exhibition today know that they are good for the entire day. So you'll still get to the permanent exhibition and can stay with us throughout our one-hour program.

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 Susan Taube is one individual's account of the Holocaust. Susan's account of that terrible time will take us from her childhood in a small town in Germany, through Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass, to deportation to a ghetto, hard slave labor, two concentration camps, a death march, liberation, and survival. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Susan's introduction.

We begin with this portrait of Susan Taube, born Susanne Strauss. Susan grew up in the small town of Vacha, in Germany, where her family had lived for more than 400 years. On this map of Europe in 1933, the arrow points to Germany. We next have a contemporary photo of Susan's home in Vacha.

In our next photograph, Susan and her mother, Bertha Strauss, pose together in a field near their home in Vacha, Germany. In this next photograph, we see Susan on the right, and her friend Rita Bergwerk.

Soon after the Nazis took power, many of Susan's friends stopped playing with her. In November 1938, the Nazis unleashed a wave of violence and terror throughout Germany known as Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass. The dots on this map of Germany represent cities where synagogues were destroyed.

This next photograph shows Germans passing the broken window of a Jewish-owned business that was destroyed during Kristallnacht. In Vacha, local party members damaged the family's store and imprisoned Susan's father in the Buchenwald concentration camp. The next photograph is of Jewish men who were rounded up and imprisoned at Buchenwald.

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On this map of ghettos established by the Nazis in Germany-- in Europe-- the arrow points to Riga where Susan and her family were deported in January 1942. This photograph is of the entrance gate to the Riga ghetto.

Eventually, Susan and her mother were sent to the Kaiserwald concentration camp to do forced labor. The arrow points to the location of Kaiserwald.

In the fall of 1944, as the Soviet army approached, Susan and her family were deported to the Stutthof concentration camp, to which our second arrow points. And here we have a photograph of the Stutthof concentration camp.

After the war, Susan married and immigrated with her husband, Herman Taube, to the United States. We close with this picture of Susan, Herman, and their children in the store that they owned in Baltimore.

Today, Susan lives in the Washington, DC area with her husband Herman, who is with us in the audience today, or will be shortly. And Herman has also been a First Person guest as-- along with Susan in previous years.

Susan ran her own small business in Baltimore for many years before coming to Washington. She has co-authored several books with her husband Herman, and Susan and Herman have four children, eight grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Susan is active with the Holocaust Survivors Association, and volunteers here weekly at the museum. You will find Susan here on Tuesdays, when she helps staff the membership and donor desk. And I ask you to please drop by and visit with her if you are here on a Tuesday, where you'll find her at the donor desk.

And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our "first person," Mrs. Susan Taube.

[APPLAUSE]

[INAUDIBLE] so it's comfortable.

Fine.

Susan, thank you for joining us and for your willingness to be our "first person." today. You were just seven and living in the small town of Vacha, Germany when Hitler came to power in 1933. After that, your life, and that of your families, would change and change dramatically. Perhaps we could start today with you telling us a little about you and your family in that time leading up to Kristallnacht, or Crystal Night, the Night of Broken Glass.

I was seven years old when Hitler came to power. I was the second grade in school. Our life was normal until then. We had very good relations with our neighbors. Always invited for Christmas parties. And the neighbors came for us for Passover to get our matzo. And my parents had a general store where you could buy anything from a stick pin, buttons, to baby carriages, sewing machines, or whatever was needed, because it was a small community, and the surrounding vicinity were mostly farm communities, and there were no businesses establishments in these places. So they came all to that place called Vacha.

And there were quite a few stores in Jewish hands. And everybody, I guess, made a living. They weren't rich. They weren't poor. Comfortable. And until 1933, when suddenly, very suddenly, very much everything changed as soon as Hitler came to power.

I remember we had to go and vote. And everybody, there's the people in uniform were staying at the voting places. And if you voted against Hitler, you were mistreated, actually. So everybody was afraid already then, and voted yeah. Even the Jewish people voted yeah.

And it didn't take long before the store was boycotted. The party people stay in front of the business, and with big signs-- "Don't buy from Jews," "Jews are our downfall," "Jews, get out of Germany." And people were afraid to come and buy

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from the Jewish people.

Still, my parents, they were always hopeful that things would change. I mean, people are people, and they see what's going on. But things didn't change. They got worse.

I went to school in that place for four years, and completely ignored after the second year of school. No friends to play with and no attention from the teachers. I was the last one to go into the class and the first one to leave the class, so nobody should, god forbid, get in touch with me.

After the four years, still I tried to learn as much as I could. And I was transferred to what's called here middle school, which was a place of higher education. We learned language there. But the same situation existed there also. And after two years in this school, my parents decided to send me to a Jewish school in Frankfurt am Main. I left my parents' house at the age of 12 and never returned.

Susan, before you tell us about Kristallnacht itself, that night, a couple of questions for you. You told me that your family store was vandalized on several occasions-- a number of occasions. And that at first, insurance would cover it. But after that, it wouldn't. Tell us a little bit about that.

Well, harassment began with throwing stones through the display windows. Nothing was stolen, but the merchandise was damaged always. So in the beginning, for one or twice, the insurance covered the damages. But then, after a third and fourth time, it happened again and again, we had to pay our own damages to-- and repair whatever was damaged at that time.

So you had to come up with a cost for doing that.

Right.

You mentioned a few moments ago that in voting for Hitler, that people were harassed for not voting for him. We like to think that we-- no one knows how we voted unless we tell them. Tell us about this family, the [? Schoens, ?] that you mentioned to me.

Well, we had neighbors. And when they came back from their voting, I remember, even my parents brought it back. After you voted, you had either no or yes. So god forbid if you had no. You didn't make it home sometimes.

So like I said before, even the Jewish people voted yes. And they came back with their little tick, whatever it was, like, and it said yes. Yes.

Well, in the beginning, we didn't know what there really is in store for everybody. Mostly the Jews. But everybody was affected eventually by the whole regime.

Tell us about Kristallnacht, the night itself, and what you remember of it.

Kristallnacht I experienced in Frankfurt am Main. Once my parents sent me away to Frankfurt to attend school there. I lived with a family by the name of [? Bamberger. ?] The lady was a widow. She had three children, and she had more children also from smaller towns who lived there. I guess that's how she supported herself.

And then came November the 10th, which was Kristallnacht. And we woke up in the morning. As I remember, it was a Thursday morning. And all the synagogues were on fire. The synagogue we belonged to was not far away, and you could see the flames, actually.

And, well, we knew that there was an incident beforehand where a young Polish-Jewish man tried to kill the ambassador in Paris. And he didn't reach him, but he reached one of the secretaries there and shot him. That man lingered for three days. And during these three days they prepared a pogrom, which was called the Kristallnacht.

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Why did that young man go to Paris? He lived in Paris. He was studying there. His parents were living in Germany. They were of Polish descent. And one night, the police came and collected all citizens-- people, not citizens-- who were not German citizens but came from Poland, scooped them up, actually, with nothing, just what they could carry, put them on a train, and put them on the border of Poland . And that's where they lingered, and the Polish government took them in eventually.

And when that young man found out, he got very upset about it, and he felt angry, and he tried to take out revenge. Well, he didn't think logically, I guess, of consequences. And the consequences were Kristallnacht, which was probably already planned ahead of time, just waiting for an excuse to implement it all. Kristallnacht--

Because it happened simultaneously all over the country.

All over Germany. All over Germany. Like I said, it started with burning of the synagogues. And we were very upset. Everybody got very upset, very anxious what's going to happen next. And the next thing we knew, they came. A horde of people came in through the door. Just didn't knock on the door. Just broke in, and came in with knives, and scissors, and axes, and whatever they had, and demolished the whole apartment.

They threw the books out. The plants were thrown out the windows. Pets and pillows were torn apart. It was just terrible. There wasn't a cup left in the cupboard in the kitchen to drink from and-- or plate to eat from.

So the next thing you know, we-- she had to go out and buy new dishes, and we were very religious people. And, well, it was terrible. It was terrible.

And also, all the young men age 18 and above were taking for protection to concentration camps-- all of them. Among them was her son, who was about 17, 18 years old at that time.

And the school also was demolished. The school was closed. And most of the teachers in that age were arrested also. And the women, they were worried about their sons and their husbands, and couldn't teach either.

So I went home to Vacha at that time. And what happened in Vacha, my-- also our store was demolished, and my father tried to hide, and police came, the next day came. And, well, everybody knew each other.

And they said, look, I have to bring in a body. And if he doesn't come, I have to take you into-- I have to arrest you. You have to come with me.

He's saying this to your mother.

My mother.

Yeah.

Yeah. So my father gave himself up, and they took him to Buchenwald, where he was for four weeks. He was among the first one to be dismissed because he was World War I veteran fighting for the German army, in the German army. And my mother had to send 10 Marks to the camp there so he could buy a ticket and come back home.

When he came back home, he, at first, he didn't even want to talk. He didn't even want to say anything. But then he started to say, look, we have to get out of here. You have no idea what the people are able to do, capable of doing to other people. And we have to do the utmost to get out of here.

Well, to get out of Germany at that time, they told us to get out. Jews get out. But nobody really accepted us. So to come to America, you had people vouch for you. You had to have relatives who did it. I mean, America also was after the Depression. It wasn't that easy.

But finally, my father found a very distant, distant cousin, and he agreed to vouch for him, and he told him, you come

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first, and settle in, have a job, an apartment, and then we will help you to get your family out. So they sent a-- sent him an affidavit-- it was called an affidavit-- to-- and we belonged to the embassy in Berlin. That went to Berlin. And once it arrived, he was notified that, yes, the papers came, and with it came a number.

Well, when my father saw the number-- I don't know what the number was. I was a child. He found out. He wrote a letter, or called, or whatever. And they told him, well, it can take two to three years, even maybe four years.

Immigration was very limited at that time for Jewish people to America. And trying to go to Palestine, which was under the English mandate at that time-- only 900 people were allowed a year to come in there. And with the 900 people, you had to bring your own money, and your own, because again, it was a poor country, and nobody wanted to take really responsibility for you.

Also, in the meantime, the papers came, and so we kind of settled in. He settled in and said, well, we wait out the time.

Susan, a couple of questions before you continue. You did have this relative in the United States, and your father's attempts to try to get to the United States began well before Kristallnacht, didn't they?

No, he couldn't.

I thought he was in contact with the family members here--

It was in contact--

Trying to.

Trying. Well, to get the paper, get paperwork so they vouch for him.

And while that was going on, then, of course, Kristallnacht occurred. He gets sent to Buchenwald. And the condition, they release him, because here he is, a veteran of their own army. They release him, but tell him he must leave the country.

He had to leave the country.

And so he went to Belgium.

Belgium, over the border, like the Mexicans are coming here now. That's how he went to Belgium. Just what he could carry in a little suitcase, and that's it.

And there's you and your mom and her two daughters.

My mother is in Vacha. I'm in Frankfurt with my sister. And my mother is in Vacha with my grandmother, who had moved in with us in the meantime, because she also lived in a very, very small town, and couldn't stay there anymore. So she moved with us. Also she got older. She moved in with us.

As your father was waiting for the papers to be cleared so that he could go, and he's in Belgium, your mother then decided to move you and your sister to Berlin to be near the US consulate in the hope of getting out of Germany. Instead, you were deported to Riga in Latvia. Tell us about the events leading up to your deportation-- the deportation, and then, of course, the arrival in Riga.

Well life became unbearable for my mother in Vacha. She had to sell the house under duress. Also, after Kristallnacht, all our assets were frozen. It was called the [? Sperre ?] Kommando. So we received only a certain amount to live off each month. And even the sale of the house went on that same account, and that was it.

My mother decided to move to Berlin because my father, in the meantime, was in America and sending us the papers.

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But again, with the number, it took forever. In Berlin, we were-- from the Jewish community in Berlin, we were assigned a small place at an apartment where already two other people were living, because a lot of these small towns then moved to bigger cities because they just couldn't live there anymore. So we lived in that apartment with a gentleman who used to be a journalist, and he was fired, naturally, and an elderly lady. And that was my grandmother, my sister, myself, and my mother in two small rooms, communal kitchen, communal bathroom-- only one bathroom. And we had to go to work.

School was over for us. All Jewish schools were closed at that time. And I was by that time 14 years old. And I had-- the Jewish community put us to work in a Jewish old-age home where elderly people were living. And we took care of the elderly people because the nurses and everybody else who were older than us were already working in factories for the war effort. They all had to be on forced labor already at that time.

I worked there, but the people, once they got sick and were taken away to a hospital, they never returned. And as the community shrank, they dismissed some of the girls. And my next job was in a daycare center, where the parents dropped the children off at 6 o'clock in the morning and picked them up around 6:00, 7:00 at night. And we had to be there--

And that's because they were working in forced labor--

They were working in factories.

--in factories. Mm-hmm.

And we had to be there on time to accept the-- to receive the children and wait until the last one leaves. And that was about an hour from where I used to live. So it was a little difficult.

You're 14 years old.

Yeah, also in 1941, we had to wear the Jewish star on the outside of each garment. It was sewn on. And the star was the word "Jude" on it. And that wasn't a pleasant experience, really.

After the-- well, now we come, actually, in 1941, when I turned 15, 15 and a half. I was assigned, myself, to a factory, where I had to build receivers for submarines. And there were a lot of Jewish people working already there also. And we were all, again, separated from the Christian people. And people were staying above us and always watching us. God forbid we shouldn't sabotage anything. We were paid, but again, the money went on that same account where we couldn't-- we just received what was given to us from the government.

So in other words, they said they paid you one thing--

They paid, but we didn't--

But you got was very different--

--we never saw a paycheck. We never saw a paycheck. That lasted until deportation, actually. Deportation started. Let me tell you the beginning of it.

The people we lived with, the gentleman, his daughter had gotten married. And she lived about a half an hour or 45 minutes from his-- from our place. And he tried to get in touch with her one day and couldn't get her on the phone.

Well, he tried a few more times, and no answers. And he was too old and couldn't go there. And about 10 days later, he received a card from Litzmannstadt, Poland. Dear Father, we were resettled to the East to make room for the Volksdeutsche-- it means citizens of Germany-- to come to the West, and we are living here. So don't worry about us. As soon as we have an address and whatever, you will hear from us again. Well, he never heard from them again.

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And then it started, slowly, slowly. My next experience with deportation came when my girlfriend, who you saw in the picture there, received their parents-- her parents received a notice, Mr and Mrs. So-and-so, due to the resettlement policy that we have right now, you will be resettled to the East. You be ready at this and this time, and you can take whatever you can carry. And if you want to take any bigger items, you bring them to a certain place and we will ship it to your new destination-- never telling any places where to go or what's going to be.

All right. A day came, and I said goodbye to her, and I gave her a self-addressed envelope, a postcard with a stamp on it. And I said, mail it as soon as you come to your destination so I know where you are. When my time comes, we will-- I hope to see you there then. Well, we knew it would come eventually. Well, she left and I never heard from her again.

At this point, as the deportation is about to take you personally, were you able to hear from your father up till that point? Up to when the war started with America.

And then it--

When America went into war, all communications ceased.

Stopped. OK.

Yeah, all communication ceased. That was in December of 1941. So 19-- end of 1941, the deportation started.

Our time came. We received a postcard. I think it was the end of December, actually, that by November 25, you will be resettled to the East. Again with the same message on it. You can take what you can carry, and the rest you bring to that place.

Well, my mother used to sew a little bit. She had a nice sewing machine. And she thought, well, I'll take that with me. Wherever we go, maybe I can earn some money this way.

So we took the sewing machine, and we took blankets, and pillows, and pots and pans, and we put it on the little carriage. We carried over KurfÃ¼rstendamm in Berlin to the place where it was assembled. That used to be a Jewish school at that time. And we left it there. No address to put on, nothing where it goes. Just put your name. That's all you need. It will be shipped to your new destination.

OK. It came. I think it was Friday evening when two Gestapo people came to the house and said, well, are you ready? We have to-- you have to give us your bank books, your papers, whatever you have that's with money, because all this money will pay for your resettlement.

So my mother-- and they gave us a receipt for it. Yes, very good. And my mother took the receipt. And that was it. Also they took her wedding ring off her finger, and--

To pay for the move.

To pay for the move. They left us enough money to take the-- it wasn't the streetcar. It was like the subway here. Something like that. And we went to a place where we were all assembled. That was a synagogue that was staying between two private homes. That couldn't be burned down. But it was-- inside, everything was demolished inside.

And that was our point of assembly. And by the time we got there, it was in late in the evening-- everything happened in the evenings. We got there. There were already quite a few people there, and more and more coming all the time.

And it got very hot in there. I remember we had layers of clothes on us. We figured, well, what we have, we can have.

There was a bucket on each side of the-- of the wall for your physical needs. And no water, no food. Nothing. Nothing. Only what we had with us.

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Well, once the train was full, about 75, 80 people in each wagon, they were sealed from the outside. And off we went. It was a very cold winter in 1942-- exceptionally cold. And the train and--

I think the journey lasted about two days, at least, because we didn't know what time it is. Nothing. We had no watches, nothing anymore. No daylight. No night. But we figured it's about two days.

Once we arrived in Riga, where all the doors were opened up. And the SS was there, and the trucks were there, and dogs, and out, out, out of the wagons. Quick, quick, quick. Schnell, schnell, schnell. Everything, everything in a hurry.

And we could hardly move. We were all sitting there for 48 hours. We couldn't move. Cold, stiff. And especially the older people, who suffered a lot. And they were beaten. It was terrible.

So again, if you cannot walk-- you have to walk about 5 kilometers to your destination. And if you cannot walk, there are trucks, we will take you there. And if not, you walk. So my family walked, and the people, older people and mothers with children, went onto the trucks. And we never saw them again.

After our walk, 5 kilometers on ice and snow, cold, terrible, terrible, we arrived in the ghetto. The ghetto was in the worst section of the city. Old houses. We were pushed into a house. No electricity, no water, no heat. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Everything was frozen, frozen there.

And so it was already kind of dusk. We didn't know what is going on. And we just sat down and waited for daylight. So when daylight came, we looked around, and we saw food on the tables, frozen food, clothes laying around, blood on the floor, terrible sights. And we couldn't figure out what happened here. We didn't know what happened.

And so we went outside and tried to look for food or something. There was nothing, nothing available. Nothing. We took snow to eat, clean snow for water, and that was it. There was no toilet, nothing there.

Susan, if I remember correctly, you described that when you actually went into the houses they put you in, that the coating of ice was over everything in the house, over the table.

Everything frozen.

Completely covered in ice.

Everything frozen. We were in that house about four days, and it was-- remembering came February 4. This I remember clearly.

In the meantime, there came transports from all over Germany, from Vienna, from Prague. Lots of people arrived. And it became overcrowded, I guess. And on the 4th of February we were again assembled in a big place. And there were the trucks again, and the same situation, and the SS. We had to stay in front of them, march by them. And one they send left and one they send right. And the one who were meant to live went to the left or right side. I don't remember. And the other ones were right away put on trucks and, farewell.

After this Aktion-- we called it the Aktion-- we could not go back to the original home. So whatever we had was already gone again. We were not allowed to go back. They pushed us in another house. They gave us a little room there. Again, a lot of people in each place.

So what we received that I remember was an apartment where you walked into the kitchen, and there was a little room, and then there was a bigger room, and that was our living space. The kitchen didn't do much good because the water didn't run. We didn't have wood to do anything. We didn't have food to cook. Nothing.

And we had that little room. That was again my mother. My grandmother was among the ones on the 4th of February lost. In that little room, we-- my mother, my sister, and myself, and a lady from Berlin that we knew who came with the same transport, and whose husband was taken away right away to another camp, and he never returned either.

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So we were in that room for a few days. And then we had to go to work. The work was organized in a way that there was-- a Jewish man was in charge of the building. And every day he was ordered to bring so many people to work. And so what we had to do, we had to stay in front of the house. And he told us, you go here, you go there, you go there, and whatever.

And once we were assigned our work, we had to march to the entrance of the ghetto. And there was police waiting for us, always with the gun. And they took us to the place of work.

My job-- my job, my mother's job and sister's were-- the first job was to clean the sidewalks from ice. We received ice picks and spades and things like that. And we had to knock off the ice from the sidewalks. And that was our job.

Before we left, we got a slice of bread. Nothing warm to eat. Nothing at all. My mind is really blank for these first few weeks, what we did for food, how we survived. I don't know.

Once the weather got warmer, that job was eliminated, naturally. And my next job was to work for the German Air Force, which the headquarters were in Riga. And again, my work consisted of cleaning, helping in the kitchen, and just doing the dirty work that had to be done.

And my mother's work was-- my mother and my sister were assigned to a warehouse where they brought in the clothes from the people who were killed. And these clothes were [INAUDIBLE]. They had to undress naked, and the clothes were picked up and sent to the warehouse to be sorted out. What was good went back to Germany, and was not so good, they put in what called a Kleiderkammer, a warehouse for the ghetto in-- ghetto people. Because after all, we came with nothing. We had that one set of clothes that was on our body. That's all we had.

And eventually it wore out. So they had the worst clothes that they could probably save from there put in that warehouse too. And we had to get permission to get it. We had to show that really it's torn apart, we cannot wear it anymore, to get a new dress or whatever.

My job at this place lasted for quite a few months. And then came summertime. And they needed young people to take peat moss. Peat moss is used there for burning. And we were sent outside the ghetto, about 40 kilometers from there. And that was our job then.

Well, by then it was warm already. Actually, that place was kind of a reprieve for us. We were among nicer-- I wouldn't say nicer people, but more compassionate people who did help us a little bit. We were in a place surrounded by barbed wire. Everything was always surrounded by barbed wire.

And in the front was a little river, so we could wash ourselves at least. And food wasn't too bad there, because they did supply us better. And that lasted for a while.

And when the fall came, back to the ghetto again. And the next job was working in a place called [NON-ENGLISH]. That was a facility where the soldiers from and to the front in Russia had their R&R. So they came [NON-ENGLISH], were de-loused there, and made human again, and going to Germany, or from Germany to Russia to the front.

And again, it was the dirty work we had to do-- wash their clothes and clean. And didn't have to cook for them. But the only good thing was there, that some of them, not all people are bad. You cannot say that. Shared their food with us, which was actually a welcome.

Susan, you had said to me that at another time, when you came back from working, digging the peat moss, and came back to the ghetto, by that time, you really, I think your words were, we knew what the ball game was by that point.

Right. Right, right. I mean, we had no hope of surviving anything. We just hoped from day to day that a miracle will happen. But the miracle took a long time to happen.

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1943 came. And also, in between time, there was always selections in the ghetto. The older people were always taken away. They disappeared. Children disappeared. And it was a very danger-- even inside the ghetto, we were always under the gun, always. An SS could walk on the street and see you, and didn't like your face or your nose, and he took out a gun and shot you. It happens.

And you told me also that despite all that inside the ghetto, you tried your best to make life as normal as you could under the circumstances. Say just a little bit about that.

The ghetto was divided in two ghettos, actually, because it was Latvia. Latvia had a big Jewish community. This community was also taken away in the December of 1941. They blamed us later. They had to make room for us. But it wasn't so. It was just one of the pogroms to eliminate, again, the people.

And what they left behind was 4,000 men for work and 300 women. And that's all that was left from the Latvian Jewish population.

Among the Latvian people were a lot of artists, young men who were soccer players. They played soccer. We had musicians. We had concerts in the ghetto. Even one time I remember the SS man came, the Kommandant of the ghetto came and listened to it. It was in a little basement hall, like.

And you had to hide these things. You couldn't have instruments. You couldn't have all that stuff. So he just was-- I don't know. Somebody tipped him off, and he came.

And we tried to make a little social life-- I mean, as much as possible. A lot of young men and young women got together. Eventually, some marriages came out of that.

You weren't allowed to have sex there because children weren't allowed, god forbid. If somebody-- I remember one woman was pregnant, and she gave birth to a child. The child was taken. They themselves, the doctor, killed the child right away.

We had a few children in the ghetto which survived. And they organized a school for the children just to keep them off the street, not to fall into the eyes of the SS. But eventually, all these children disappeared. But then the ghetto, then came the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. And I guess word got around that people do have resistance feeling in them. And actually, in Riga also they built a resistance. But somehow they found out, and all the people involved were tortured and killed eventually.

The Riga Ghetto was emptied out. And again, the younger people, the one who were able to work, were sent to Kaiserwald, which was already a concentration camp barracks, straw, bridges like. And very little food, very little things to do. Striped clothing. Hair was shorn off. And that was Kaiserwald.

I myself have to say I was lucky. Beside Kaiserwald, there were workplaces where the people were also housed. So my place of work, where I had to work, was called-- excuse me-- Meteor. This was a rubber factory where they used to make rubber boots and-- for--

For pontoon boats?

--tires, tires for cars. That was the factory. And that was converted into making wooden shoes-- wooden shoes because leather was not available. And they brought in there the platoon boats from the rivers where they built bridges over. And this was, when they were shot up, they came to that place to be repaired.

We were a hundred women there, and about 30 men who did that work. The work was a dirty work, again. It was a big factory. The boots were laid out on big tables. And they had to be cleaned. The mens cleaned them out and the women had to fix them up again with synthetic rubber, they used, which was very nauseating and dangerous for your health. But since it was really an important job to do, and they couldn't just train anybody for it, and wouldn't. So eventually, these people who worked on these boots received milk to counteract a little bit the--

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The fumes and all of that?

The fumes from the-- yeah.

Our work was from usually from 8:00 till 5:00 in the evening. We got a piece of bread in the morning. When we got back, we got soup and a piece of bread, and that was it.

But we have to-- I have to say the conditions were not too bad there because it was a clean facility. Even so, we also we had just bunk beds, we had. And all in one big room. About 100 women all in one big room together.

But we had showers. We could shower. And it wasn't-- like I said, it was not too bad.

My job, again, I was again lucky. I was taken out from that kind of dirty work and put in another room where the boats had to be painted before they could be put in action. So three women were chosen to do the painting. And we were in a big room with windows, which was pleasant. And also, in that same room was a little office where the overseer and the military person was who oversaw all that.

And from there, we heard kind-- the news what's going on in the world a little bit, not from the America or England, but from the German side. And from the German side, it wasn't too bad either, because eventually we always heard there was a successful retreat of the army. And we knew what a successful retreat was. So our hopes went really up a lot.

Also, we had a doctor there and a nurse, also prisoners, a young doctor and a nurse who took care of the sick. We had one case where there was meningitis breaking out, and they isolated that girl, and she recuperated, and she today lives in Boston. So she's all right.

As I said, it wasn't such a bad place. But it didn't last long, because the front was coming closer. And one day they came to the place where we worked and marched us off back to Kaiserwald without any explanation, without anything. We just knew that the front is coming closer.

So we went back to Kaiserwald. We were in Kaiserwald for about two weeks. And then we, August 6, we were marched to the harbor in Riga. There was a big boat waiting for us, and about 6,000 people were pushed onto that boat. Only standing room only, no sitting, no-- no air, no food. Nothing. Nothing.

And on that boat we were shipped off to Danzig, Danzig, Germany. Again, we didn't know what's happening. What's happening we didn't know, what is going to be. Also on to this boat came people from all over places, like where I was, [INAUDIBLE] and my girlfriend, her parents were called in a place called Strassenhof. And when the people from Strassenhof came, she looked for her parents. No parents. Everybody over 35 didn't go to the boat.

So we were on that boat. Again, I don't know the time. Maybe two days, two nights. I don't know. And we arrived during daylight in a place called Danzig. And we were disembarked. And we sat around for a while.

And the boat, that big boat left. And then came little boats, and where you transport coal in. And we all were put in these little boats. We couldn't stand up. We only had to crouch.

Like coal barges.

Coal boards. Coal barges. We crouched down. And from this, they took us to the concentration camp Stutthof. We never heard of Stutthof before. We never heard of any concentration camps before. We lived kind of our own life. We didn't know about Auschwitz. We didn't know anything about that.

So we arrived in Stutthof, and we were dismissed. We looked at each other. We were all kind of black, dirty-- I mean from the coal dust there. But we saw the sign, Arbeit macht frei. And everything looked beautiful-- flowers, lawns, beautiful. The entrance.

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But about 100 meters in, the picture changed dramatically. And what we saw was barracks and nothing else. Barracks and sand.

So to begin with, I guess they just assigned us to a barrack. I think our number was 15. I'm not that sure anymore. Planks, four high. And you like sardines, one head, one toe, three to a bridge-like thing. Straw. And that's it. Nothing else. Four high.

And you didn't know what you want to go on the top or do you want to be on the bottom. So whatever-- I don't-- I think I was at the top, if I remember correctly. But the top was very hot. It was August, and it was very hot there.

The SS girls, there were already then women in charge, and they were sometimes worse than the men. Horrible, horrible people.

Women members of the SS?

Of the SS. SS girls, yeah.

In Stutthof, in the morning, about 5 o'clock, as soon as it got light, you get out of the barracks. You had to stay on Appell-- that called Appell-- to be counted and counted and counted, five deep in the row. They went through you. They looked at you every day. They looked at your faces. And if they didn't like your face, they pulled you out and you disappeared.

I know the elderly people, they always they pinch their cheeks to look healthy. We were wondering why they did it, but then we found out. They just bring bring their blood up a little bit.

We were there two weeks in Stutthof under these circumstances. One little bowl of soup a day and one piece of bread. That was it. Nothing else.

And Appell in the morning. You stood for three or four hours. Then you were dismissed. And if they felt like it, they did it to you on the day again, and again at night. At night you stayed there until it got dark. And then they dismissed you and you went back to your barracks.

Again, I was lucky among 500 other women. One day, when the Appell was, they just counted 500 women up, and said, go to the side. And that was it. So we stood there for a while. And then they took us out of the camp to the train station. And we were transported on a regular train, actually, to a place called Sophienwalde. They never told us what's going to be, or where you going, or what is in the store for you, nothing.

So we came to Sophienwalde. And again, we had to get out of the train. And we marched a few kilometers. And we came to a camp that was made out of little huts from plywood. And in each of these little huts they pushed 15 people. On the floor was only straw again and nothing else. Nothing else. A little window in the wall and that's it.

OK. We sat there. We received a blanket. And since we were five girls together, we kind of shared everything. So we had five blankets among us. So we had two to put down on the straw, two for a pillow-- one for a pillow to cross, and the other ones we covered ourselves. Later on, these blankets were used as coats, et cetera.

All right. In the morning, we got up. Our Kommandant was a man called Schultz. We had three SS girls there, and also police, SS men, to watch over us. In the morning, we had to stay-- come out and be counted to make sure all 500 are there. And we were giving-- assigned our work.

We were giving shovels, and spades, and picks, and we marched off to forest, which used to be a forest, and the trees were cut down. And we had to dig out the roots from the trees because this was supposed to be a-- what is it called? A training ground for the military. It was inside, actually, in the east of Germany on the border of Poland. And it was not very much populated there. So they used that place to make it a training ground for the military.

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So that was our job, to take out the--

So dig up roots, the tree roots.

The roots from the trees. They have lorries there. We had to put it in the lorries and push the lorries away. There was a dumping ground.

And in the morning, a piece of bread. That's how we marched out. And--

I think, if I remember right, you told me that you really began to suffer from lice at that point.

Lice. That's right. I wanted to come to the lice, yeah. The lice, actually, we got in Stutthof already. I mean, that was full of lice, and we just couldn't do anything about it.

So once we were working in the woods there, we had a little latrine, like, for our comfort. And one by one we went there always for a break, and we took off our clothes, and we tried to kill the lice. It didn't do much good. As many as we killed them, more came. So it was already in the store. It was everywhere. It was just--

And a lot of people also from the lice became sick, and became-- they had rashes. And it was a few people died of sickness from that blood. And meningitis some had. So they died. Yeah, yeah. And-- yeah, go on.

In the late winter of 1945 now, after you've endured all of that, as the Russian army really began to close in, you were then forced on a death march before you were liberated. Tell us about that.

Well, after it got colder, we couldn't stay in these little huts anymore. So they put us in unfinished living quarters, what was supposed to be for the soldiers. I became a bricklayer too. I built a facility there too. So they arranged for us to lay there on the bottom.

So one day they came, and it was, I think, the end of January. It was past Christmas, I know, because Christmas is celebrated there.

And they came. The front is coming closer. We cannot stay here. We have orders to bring you back to Stutthof. If you can walk, you're welcome to walk. It's about 120, 150 kilometers. I don't know exactly how much. And if you cannot walk, you stay here, and somebody will take care of you.

Well, we, the five girls, we were together. We decided to walk, and so did about 320 other people walking. And the rest stayed behind. And we never saw them again. So we walked every day in the snow, in the rain, in cold weather.

And it was an especially brutal winter.

Especially brutal winter. We were cold, wet, yeah. No shoes. The wooden shoes. No clothes. We had the blankets over our shoulders for protection.

And every day we walked. And in the night, they put the-- pushed us into a barn, if they could find one on the way. If he could find some supplies, some food for us, he gave it to us. Most of the time, we had no supply. Again, we scooped up the snow from the ground, and that was our nourishment.

A lot of people fell behind, and once you fell behind, that was it. That was the end.

So we walked. And we finally, we came, after I think about 10 days, we came to a place called Lauenburg. Lauenburg was an empty camp of barracks. There used to be a British prison-- POWs. And they also were evacuated already.

And in this camp, we were the first ones to arrive there. And eventually more and more and more people came from all

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over, all over. Because everywhere were little camps where the people had to work. And once the front came, they concentrated all these people there.

Our nourishment there was, well, where they find-- when they found a dead horse, they made us a soup, rotten potatoes. And we went out sometimes to find something for ourselves. But there was nothing, nothing available. I just don't know how we survived. I don't.

We stayed there about four weeks. We came there in February. And in March, again, the beginning March, we heard already the shooting. We heard it already, very, very loud and very clear. We cannot stay here. The Russians are coming. And they will kill you all-- as if they wouldn't kill us. And we have to march again and we have to get away from here.

So we marched a whole night. A whole night we marched in the rain. And in the morning we were pushed into a barn called [NON-ENGLISH]. They pushed us in there, and there were already hundreds and hundreds of people there, dead, alive, sick. My friend [? Nesse ?] was there. I found out later--

[? Nesse, ?] would you wave your hand? Yeah.

Yeah, we met later. We found out later about it. But she was there. So she has the story too.

And we will just later. We didn't know. Maybe they were ready to put a bomb in there or whatever. I don't know. Anyhow, it was a early morning. We heard suddenly big booms, big, big, booms. And the door was open. The Russians came in. They thought maybe it's military or whatever. And what they saw, they couldn't believe their eyes.

So the doors were opened. And so what are you going to do? The doors are open. Where are you going? No place to go.

Anyhow, we went out. And there were dead people laying all around the place-- soldiers, civilians-- ach. A terrible sight. A terrible sight.

The Germans were ready to leave that place. It was a German village. And they were packed up with-- on horse and buggies, and to leave. And we weren't very nice people. So we went onto these wagons, and we helped ourself to whatever we could help ourselves to. And my first food was sauerkraut.

[LAUGHTER]

That I didn't die right there and then, on an empty stomach, not eating for weeks.

Oh, my.

So I think I still have a good stomach, actually.

[LAUGHTER]

Because of that.

And that was-- so the day went by. We just wandered around doing nothing, nothing. In the evening, no place to go. We went back to the barn. We slept again in the barn.

But in the morning, then Russian officer came to us, and a few people had left already. It wasn't such a nice situation either. A lot of we went to the German houses, and then the Russians came in, and it wasn't that nice, either.

But we went back to the barn. And in the morning, when they came to us, they told us, you cannot stay here. We are still fighting here. The front is here. You have to go east.

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So they provided us with a horse and buggy, and about 15 women and two men. They were the [INAUDIBLE], the chauffeurs. We went east.

Our next destination I don't remember. I don't remember where we went. But then, again, we came to a place. And there were already-- I guess it was like a headquarters for the Russian army again, because also they took us there to work. They didn't let us rest. They cleaned us up.

And then put you right to work.

Right to work. So we worked in that officer's club. We had to cook and clean, and you know. But they treated us nice.

Actually, I remember we were in this place when Roosevelt died, because there we found out that Roosevelt died. And they were very, very sad about it. Everybody very sad.

And well, once they went on again. So they put us on a farm where we had to clean the fields up and planted potatoes and other stuff. We were housed there. We were fed there. And we had potatoes in the morning, potatoes at night. And I looked pretty good after a few days. I looked healthy.

Susan, we're just about out of time, unfortunately. And I know we could spend all afternoon and only scratch the surface of what Susan could share with us.

That's right.

Before we have to close up the program, Susan, if you wouldn't mind, I think we'd all like to hear, if you can tell us in a few words, about how you met Herman. And if you wouldn't mind sharing that with us.

[LAUGHS]

[LAUGHTER]

Well, after the farm, they, again, when the farm work was finished, they put us in a place called Koszalin, where our job was to empty out the houses, the German residents, from whatever wasn't nailed down or to the wall, fastened to the wall. All this was placed in a warehouse to be sent to Russia.

We were, I think six or seven girls. They gave us an apartment at that time. And we stayed in that apartment, and we went to work.

And we didn't cook for ourselves. There was a communal kitchen there where we went to eat. The manager was a Jew from Romania, a Jewish soldier from Romania.

And one day, I understand there came a young man from a different place, called Plate. And for-- my husband was a medic in the-- in a Polish division that was adjusted to the Russian army. And he came for medication there, because there was a big warehouse for his little hospital in Plate, which he organized at that time.

And the warehouse wasn't far from that kitchen. So he wondered for some reason into that kitchen. And the man told him that here are survivors from the camps. Would you like to meet them? So sure, why not?

So he came. We met. He met everybody. And I told him we have a very sick girl among us who is in another apartment, and she needs medication. We don't know what's wrong with her. She runs a high fever, and we don't know what's wrong with her.

So he went to see her. And he discovered that she was really with a contagious illness. And he told us all to leave and get out of there. And he took me with him to get some medication for her to take it back. And so it went back and forth, kind of.

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And while he had to go back to his place in Plate. And for some reason, the Russians wouldn't let us go back to Germany. I don't know what the reason was. They said you could work for the Germans. You can work for us.

And anyhow, you have nobody there anymore. There's no family there. Nothing. Come with us. But naturally, we didn't. Nobody wanted to go to Russia.

So finally, he asked, when he came again for a visit, he asked me if I would-- he was in-- in the meantime transferred to East Germany to a different place with his unit. And he asked me if I would like to come with him. I said, sure, why not? Nothing to lose.

[LAUGHTER]

The other girls, I eventually had to tell them-- had to tell the Russians they were citizens of Holland, and then they let him go.

By saying they were citizens of Holland.

The other girls were. Yeah. So they let them go, finally.

So I went with my husband, and we were stationed then in Halle-Merseburg in East Germany. And, well, the war was over by that time. And he was dismissed from the army.

And also, he was looking for his family. He wanted to go back to Poland. So we went back to Poland to look for his family. But nobody survived.

And we stayed in Poland, actually, for about a year. He worked in the hospital. He organized everything, cleaned up the city, which was also not devastated, but a lot of dead people were laying around and all that.

And then came 1946. And we found out through the press or by word of mouth that there was, in Kielce, Poland, a pogrom where the Poles went into a house and killed about 45 survivors. So when we heard this, we decided to leave Poland. And there was the Palestinian underground at that time. They took us over the border to Germany. No man's land. From no man's land to Germany, to Berlin.

In Berlin was only two weeks. We were transported to another DP camp in Ziegenhain, which was West Germany. West Germany's Ziegenhain. And since I was a German-Jewish citizen, at that time recognized as a German citizen, I could leave that DP camp.

And I was assigned two rooms in a place called Alsfeld, where my father came from. We were located in a house that also had belonged to Jewish people who were lucky enough to immigrate to America. Had to sell the house under duress also. I met them later in New York.

And a teacher boarded. A German teacher boarded. And we were assigned two rooms there in that house.

And eventually, you would be able to find your father in the United States.

Well, while we were traveling back and forth, I had a letter prepared for my father. I kept his address in my mind the whole time. And the letter, once we met-- so someplace on a railroad station we saw an American soldier. And I asked him to mail that letter to America for me. And he did. But we had no return address. So it was no way we should find out what-- if he got it or not.

So once we were settled in Poland, we-- I wrote another letter to him, to the same address. And that was forwarded to him. The first letter was not forwarded to him. They told the postman, the man doesn't live here anymore, and that's it. But when the second letter came, they did forward it to him, because by that time they had found out what was

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happening.

So then we got in touch with my father. And-- in Poland. And he was living in Baltimore. And also with German refugees who had left Germany before the war.

And we-- he provided the papers for us. And we came to America. Actually it will be 60 years next month.

Next month. All right, Susan, I want to thank you, of course, for being our "first person" and our audience for being here. And I wish we could stay all afternoon. Susan, can you stay afterwards for a few minutes, if people would like to chat with you over at the side. We're going to close the program in just a couple of moments.

I'd like to first remind you that we, with just three exceptions, we'll have a First Person every Wednesday until the end of August, the 29th of August. We'll have another First Person program next Wednesday, the 28th of March, again at 1 o'clock. And our first person next week will be Mrs. Erika Eckstut.

Mrs. Eckstut, who is from Czechoslovakia, survived the Holocaust by posing as a Christian with false identity papers. So we welcome you next week, or any week that you can make it this year between now and the end of August.

It's our tradition at First Person that our "first person" has the last word. And so with that, I'd like to turn back to Susan to close our program today.

Well, I prepared this at home. It is a difficult subject to speak about, and our suffering, our losses. But it's our obligation as survivors. And the numbers are very diminishing. We are getting old and we are dying.

To share this with the younger generation, to bring the message, what hate and bigotry can lead to. It took the life of 6 million Jews-- men-- [SOB] could you read it?

Absolutely. It took the life of 6 million Jews-- men, women, and 1.5 million children, and ended with 51 million people of all colors and creed whose lives were lost because of hate. Beware. Think about what you see and have heard, and be sensitive to what you've heard here today and have heard in this museum. And our slogan is "Never again."

[APPLAUSE]

OK.

Thank you, Susan.

Thank you for coming.

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