Welcome. Thank you for joining us for First Person-- Conversations with Holocaust Survivors. My name is Bill Benson. I have hosted the museum's First Person program since it began in 2000. Thank you for joining us today. Through these monthly conversations, we bring you firsthand accounts of survival of the Holocaust. Each of our first person guests serves as a volunteer at the museum.

Holocaust survivors are Jews who experienced the persecution and survived the mass murder that was carried out by the Nazis and their collaborators. This included those who were in concentration camps, killing centers, ghettos, and prisons, as well as refugees, or those in hiding. Holocaust survivors also include people who did not self-identify as Jewish, but were categorized as such by the perpetrators.

During our program, please, send us your questions and let us know where you are joining us from in the chat. We are honored to have Holocaust survivor Halina Peabody share her personal first-hand account of the Holocaust with us. Halina, welcome and thank you so much for being willing to be our first person.

Thank you very much for your introduction. Thank you very much. And hello, everybody.

Halina, you have so much to share with us. So we're going to go ahead and get started. You were born December 12, 1932 in Poland. Please begin today by telling us about your family and life in your hometown of Zaleszczyki leading up to World War II.

Well, this was a resort town. And the weather was fantastic. In the summer, it was very hot. We could go on the water. And in the winter, you could go skiing there and skating there. My mother was a champion swimmer. So she loved the water. She did water skiing there too. And she taught me to skate and to ski. And she loved every sport. And my father was a dentist. So he was-- he's the one in the middle. My mother is in front of him. To the left are two of my grandparents who came for a visit from KrakÃ³w, where we were all born. And this is a friend on the right.

So Halina, you started to tell us about your father's occupation. So he was a young dentist at the time, right?

That's correct. And that's why we were in a small town of Zaleszczyki, because he felt that it was too difficult to start a practice in a town like KrakÃ³w, full of professionals. So when they got married, they decided to find a smaller place. And Zaleszczyki was a perfect little place for us because the weather was wonderful and we had a very nice life there.

You already mentioned that your mom was quite the athlete. Tell us more about her. She was, really, a very, very unique person.

Well, she was a natural. She started swimming very young. When her older sister-- that's Irka here, her older sister, Irka-- when the other sister--

Irka's on our left, right?

Yes. My mother is on the right. And I'm in the middle. So when she took her to the water, and she was just beginning to learn to swim, she still was so fast, nobody could keep up with her. And eventually, she won the Polish championship, became very famous, and enjoyed every other sport that she could.

She was absolutely fearless. She would jump from the highest platform. She skied and also jumped on skis. She skated. And as I said, I was skating at five because she taught me. And I had bicycles, and tricycles, and dolls, and my Shirley Temple doll, which I have it still-- not the real one, but somebody bought me one just as a memory. So the life was very, very good.

In fact, she was not just the national Polish champion, I think she was for three consecutive years.

Yes.

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Yeah.

And she was going to the Olympics. But the crawl came in. She did the others, the-- which one is that one?

Oh, the breaststroke? Yeah.

The breaststroke, yes. And when the crawl came in, apparently, that did not make her the fastest anymore. So she did not make the Olympics. That's what she told me.

Tell us a little bit more about Zaleszczyki. You said it was a resort town. And it was I believe right on the river Dniester, is that correct?

Dniester, yes. It was a natural-- Dniester was the natural frontier between Poland and Romania. And when you went on the boat, you could go only halfway because it had buoys in the middle. But there was a very friendly frontier. And you could walk over, get a daily pass to go, though we used to go over for grapes and other fruit, although we had them in the garden. You could grow all these things in our garden because the weather was so fantastic. So we could go any time. And as I said, it was very, very friendly.

And you described that you had two beaches in Zaleszczyki. And I like the name of the beaches. And here you are at the beach.

Yes-- Sunny and Shady.

That's the name of the beaches, right? Yeah.

And it was Sunny, one was Shady, yes.

So what was it like for you to grow up in a resort town? I mean, that sounds remarkable.

Well, this was a wonderful-- it was a wonderful life as long as it was peaceful. And then my mother explained to me that well, she had a big tummy, but I was going to have a brother or a sister. She never told me it was a stork coming-- not stork coming, no. She just told me the truth. My mother always told me the truth. And she went back to KrakÃ³w to give birth because she wanted to be near her mother. So I was left with my father and waited for my mother to come back with my baby sister.

And she-- and this is Eva, who I think was born in June of 1939, just really two months before the war began.

That's right.

We have another photograph here. Tell us about this before we begin to talk about the war years-- photograph of your-- yeah.

That, again, is before the war. That's my father, the first one. There's a friend of ours. And my mother is in the middle and then my grandfather. And then there's another lady friend, and then my grandmother, and a friend again. And this was all before the war. They were just on the road, just on the river to enjoy the weather and the views there.

Yeah, it's a lovely photograph.

Halina, in September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the west, while the Soviet Union invaded from the east, occupying your town. Your father fled across the Dniester River into Romania. Tell us why your father went across to Romania at that time.

My father and many other people grabbed whatever they could. The gate was open. And when they heard that they were going to be overtaken by the Russians, they rushed over-- my father, because he was afraid of being conscripted into the

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Russian Army, which was what they did in the First World War. And that's 20 years hard labor. And you couldn't get out.

So he ran away by himself because he felt that he was the one in danger. And he didn't think women and children are in danger. But after a while, the Russians came in, they demanded the gold and the silver, and they pilfered, and they took some people and arrested them for whatever they felt needed to be. And my father and some other people that rushed over so quickly decided, maybe things are now settled. And maybe they could just slip by quietly over and just go back to their families.

The river was frozen over. So they tried to cross back over the frozen river. And what happened was that the Russians had sealed the border by then. And they caught them all, including my father. And they arrested them all. And in my father's case, they said that he was a spy because he went and he came back. And they-- on the trial, they gave him 20 years hard labor and sent him off to Russia. And for one year, we didn't hear anything.

So they sent him into Siberia, right?

To Siberia for hard labor.

20-year sentence. And was there any fear that you and your mother or sister could also be sent away?

Indeed, there was. We were ready. My mother was all packed. We were supposed to be taken to Russia as well, to Siberia. But they didn't pick us up. Nobody knew why. But they threw us out of our house to a small town just out of the-- I don't know, not too far from our, a little town called Tluste. And that we were told to live in a sort of a home for different other people that they threw out. And that's where we were supposed to be.

So you ended up in Tluste at that time.

Before we go on, Halina, I'd like to let that there are a lot of people from a lot of different places watching you and listening to you today. We have viewers joining us from Florida, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Montana. And we have international viewers today from Brazil, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and students, including eighth graders from Chattanooga, Tennessee.

And we have some comments coming in already from viewers. Giovanni says, thank goodness for the First Person conversations with Holocaust survivors. The value of such media outreach is so direct with the opportunity to hear firsthand experience. So now, Halina, you are in this new town Tluste-- Tluste under the Soviet occupation. What was life like under the Soviets for you with your mother alone caring for you and your baby sister Eva?

I frankly don't know how she managed. I do know that I was put in school. But instead of going to kindergarten, as I was supposed to go, they dropped everybody one class. So I was pre-kindergarten. The reason for that is because they already made the plans that they were going to forever stay there. And they were going to teach us how to be good communists. I was six and a half, seven years old. But that was apparently the plan.

So they're there, basically, to train you to become a communist at that time.

That's correct, yes.

And the picture we just saw, that was you, and your mother, and your sister while living in Tluste under the Soviets.

Correct. And that's the only baby picture of her that we have.

A couple of moments ago, Halina, you mentioned that your mother didn't hear-- none of you heard from your father for a good long time. But eventually, you did get some correspondence from him.

After a year, apparently, that he had been in a prison for that year, he was out working the hard labor part. And so he

contacted us. And he told us where he was. And he was in Arkhangelsk in Russia. And he was working there. And he just wanted to know if everybody was-- how we were doing and had a little bit of contact with us. So my mother did send him a pillow, I remember, and just a couple of times, the exchange of letters. And of course, that would end when the Germans turned on the Soviets.

Yes.

Before we go on to that, Halina, let me share with you another comment from a viewer. She says-- or he or she says, I am a teacher. And I cannot express how valuable your work is for today's youth. Thank you, with a nice big heart attached to the end of the message. And I'd like to also remind our audience to please, share your questions for Halina via the chat feature.

Halina, you were eight years old when Germany attacked the Soviet Union and occupied the rest of Poland, including where you were living. Conditions, of course, turned dramatically worse for Jews, including for your family. Tell us what happened once the Germans took control of where you were living in Poland.

Yes, when the Germans were coming, the Russians disappeared. And my mother just packed us up. And we went back to Zaleszczyki into our house and settled in, waiting for the next occupier. And then they arrived with great noise. And it was very frightening. They came on motorcycles with very flashy black boots. I remember, I was standing there and watching. And I remember my mother pulling me away. It was just a frightening, frightening thing just to see them.

But the moment they came, they made a very, very big difference to our lives. And I realized that being Jewish is the worst thing I could be at this point because the Jews had the worst the worst of the laws that they put in.

First of all, we had to put a Jewish star on our house, on all the clothes we wore. There were no school for children. There was-- everybody, every single person had to be working for the Germans. And they demanded certain groups of people. Going out, they would take a group of people out into the country to do some jobs. And that came-- that became a sort of way to get everybody to work. OK.

What did-- what was the work your mother was forced to do?

My mother's job was to knit for the mayor of the town's children-- German, of course. They had list of everybody. They knew who knew what. And they knew my mother was a very good knitter. So that was her job. And she did. Everybody was very cooperative. We all tried very hard. And if there was no job for somebody, they would make them clean the sidewalks. But everybody did what they were told to do.

And then one day, of course, a story that you've-- painfully remember-- a large number of young men and women were demanded to go work in a nearby forest. Can you tell us about that day?

Yes. This time, they said, there was a big job. They had to be covering the young tree trunks for the winter. The winter was very harsh. And they were supposed to take burlap and cover the trunks of the trees. But over 600 people went, young people, mainly. And some even went, just came as volunteers. And so they walked them out.

So volunteered even more than the number that they gathered.

Yes, that's right. That's right. Everybody wanted to help. As I said, we were very cooperative. We wanted everything to be just right. So and then we waited for them to come back. And nobody came back. And we didn't know what happened. Everybody was terribly nervous. And I remember, we just didn't know what was happening until late at night, my mother explained to me what happened.

One man managed to escape. And he told us that when they came, what they found-- no job. There were graves, open graves with sticks over them. And they were told to undress and lay on those sticks. And they were shot. And as they were shot, they dropped into the grave. And they didn't even want to have the trouble of having to bury them. So that was-- that's what they did.

And then my-- the guy that managed to escape was on top. And when they left, the graves were full. So he was one of the top ones. And he managed to drag himself out. He had had one shot. They missed his heart and hit his arm, which was loose. And they never recovered that. And he told the story what happened. And at this point, of course, everybody was understood what was happening and started looking for hiding places for the next time they would ask for somebody to come to work.

In September 1942, Halina, Nazi authorities forced the remaining Jewish community in Zaleszczyki to Tluste, where you had been before. And it became an open ghetto in December of 1942. Open ghettos were not surrounded by walls. And Jews could come and go a little bit more freely than in a closed ghetto. Tell us what you and your mother did once you arrived in Tluste.

Well, the first thing, everybody was looking for hiding places. And she talked to me as if I was a grown-up. But she had to make me understand what was happening. She said that it's not the end. And they expected that they will do the same here with the groups. They were going to take groups. And nobody was coming back. So everybody was looking for hiding places, preparing for the next demand for people.

And sure enough, there was a demand again. This time, they said, they needed more people for work in Germany. And everybody hid as best as they could. And now, we-- my mother took my sister and me to a lady that she knew from before because we had been there before. So she met some people. She put me with a lady. And she put me in the attic. And she and my baby sister went to another lady, where she paid her in advance to just keep her during the day, whilst they were collecting the people that they needed. Yeah.

So I waited all day long. We-- I was terrified that she was caught. I didn't know what was going on. The lady that kept me kept telling me that my mother was not caught. But she told me some people I knew that were caught. And they were all put in the square openly. And they were waiting to get the right number. They always had to have a number. And as the day went on, there were more people coming. They found another lot of people. But my mother was not seen.

But you had no idea, at the time, where your mom was or if she was safe.

Oh, no, I-- no, no. Not at all. I just had this terrible fear and that worry that my mother might be caught. And towards the evening, they finally put the people on the train. And then my mother did come with my sister to pick me up. And she said to me-- she was just as traumatized as I was. She said, we'll never do this again because all day long, she thought I was caught. And she said, we will never, never go separately. We will stay together for whatever happens, whatever happens will happen to the three of us.

And then she told me what happened to her. The lady that had her got scared in the middle of the day and threw her out, just simply threw out into the grass. There was a grassy knoll there. And she said, there was one bush. And she crouched under that bush for the rest of the day with my sister.

And she said, there were airplanes flying around. They were looking for stragglers. By some miracle, they did not spot her. That's why she said, we will, as I say, stay together from now on. And then everybody, again, went back to trying to figure out if there is a way to escape. Is there any way to run away? Is there? There was no way. They tried everything.

So that's what led your mother-- and with the help of some friends-- to buy false documents from a priest, identifying you as Catholics. Tell us how they managed to get those documents and what that meant for you.

Well, first of all, they said that look-- and they were all such good friends. They helped my mother with so many things. But they said, look, you're three females. You can't be checked if you're Jewish. You know that men can be checked. Women cannot. And you don't look Jewish, you don't speak Yiddish. You're blonde, green-eyed like me. Perhaps we will have a chance of passing as non-Jewish. And perhaps we could help you get the papers as somebody else. And they took my mother to a priest. And he just issued new identity cards for everybody.

Which is what we see here, right?

Yes. I gave them to the museum, yes.

So that's actually your identification paper.

That's my-- yes, my birth certificate-- false, but yes.

Falsified as a Catholic. We have a close-up. It's a little difficult to see, but the circled part, that's your name. And it says right underneath that, it's at-- it's vertical so a little difficult to see, but it says, Roman Catholic under your name. There, they call you Alina.

Yeah, they dropped the H for no good reason. That is something that I've never-- Halina is a Polish name, so I don't know why they dropped the H. But anyway, I became Alincia, which I hated. But anyway, that's just by the way. Yes.

And Halina, it's one thing to get-- as difficult as it was, to get the papers saying that you are now somebody else, you're now a Catholic. But there's a lot more to trying to pass as a Catholic than that. What did that mean for you? How did you manage to learn what you had to learn?

Well, my job was to learn my new name, my new grandparents, my new birthplace. And my mother just sat me down and taught me that there was no other way. And I learned. And she said that that's what your identity is right now. And I understood very well what I have to do. I very much wanted to live. And I knew that if they catch us then we have no choice. And we knew the children did not survive at all. So I knew what my job was to be. And I became my mother's partner.

When you think about that, you were just 10 years of age doing that.

10 in those days, you grew up very fast. And then she told me that we were going to try and go to a town of Jaroslaw, which was apparently a Judenfrei, they called it-- no Jews. They apparently took all the Jews out there. There are no Jews there. So that's why we were going and to try and pass.

Friends took us to the railway station. And they said goodbye. And none of them, by the way, survived for very long. But they were the friends. And we said goodbye. We had some suitcase and some other luggage. And my mother just carried my sister and me by the hand. We walked. We settled down in a carriage. And we knew that this was going to take two days and two nights to travel to Jaroslaw. The olden times, it took much longer.

And we settled in. And we had to change in the middle somewhere. But in the meantime, we just sat in, and settled in, and started going. And somewhere, sometime, I don't know-- I didn't pay much attention.

Suddenly, my mother quietly said to me, you know, this man that's talking to me, he is a Volksdeutsche. He is a partially German. They had some special advantages being partially German.

And you referred to as Volksdeutsche, so basically German folk.

Yes. And I-- and he apparently pushed her very, very hard. He suspected that we were not who we said we were. And my mother said, she just had to-- she just gave in. She said-- and yes. I mentioned that we were Jewish. And at that point, he said, well, I am going to Jaroslaw as well. So I'm going to accompany you. And when we get to Jaroslaw, I will pass you over to the Gestapo.

And so that's how we continued to travel. He was very careful not to-- one of the kids were always in his sight because he knew that we weren't going to run. We weren't going to run. But he was very careful. And so he took care of us for until we got to Jaroslaw. And as far as I was concerned, I understood that going to the Gestapo was the end.

And as we got off the plane-- off the train in Jaroslaw, I started pulling at my mother. I suddenly realized what was

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happening. And I said mom, mom, I don't want to die. And my mother, well, what could she do? But she asked him. She said, why don't you just let her go? And she's blonde, again, green-eyed, maybe she'll survive.

But just you go, you by yourself.

Yes, yes. But I said, no-- I don't know if he'd said yes or no, even. I said, I'm not going without you. So that was that. And so we started walking towards the Gestapo. And my mother, again-- she never gave up. So she, at one point, says this, look, I gave you everything I have. Keep it. Why don't you just let us go and try our luck?

And then she added, why do you want us on your conscience? And something touched him. He did have children. So he stopped, and turned around, and gave my mother a few zlotys back, and said to her, from bad to worse-- in Polish, it's from-- [POLISH], meaning from rain to underneath. And there's no good translation, but it's from bad to worse, that he felt that we got from bad to worse because that we had nothing. We were just without anything. But he left us. He just walked off.

And I just might add here, Halina, that your mother had already, other than the few dollars-- in Polish money, of course-- that he gave back to your mom, he had the tickets for your luggage so you had nothing.

Everything. We had nothing at all.

Just the clothes on your back.

My mother was carrying my sister and me by the hand. And there were the three of us standing in the middle of a strange town, just standing there, not knowing what to do.

And as you said a few moments ago, this was a town that was called Judenfrei, that there were no Jews there. And now, you're there in the middle of this town.

Yes, that's right. But my mother, as usual, looks around. And she's never short of trying things. So she spied a little cafe. And we walked into the cafe. And she asked them for some milk for my sister and started asking people there, other people there, if there was anybody who knew of a place where we could find lodgings. And somebody got up, a young man, and he said, yes, there's a washer woman not too far from here. And she takes lodgers. And I'll take you over there. And she walked us over there.

So when we got there, my mother said, you know, I don't have any money. But as of tomorrow, I go to work and whatever I may earn, I bring to you for keeping us. And she said, OK. And then her sons come up and-- came up and said, oh, mama, don't take her. After four days and four nights on the train, you can imagine that we didn't look very attractive. But she said, oh, no, she said, this is a mother and two children. I have to take her.

And we have a picture of the actual house here, don't we?

Yes, yes. And that house had three separate-- well, I don't call them apartments, but we were in the middle one. And she took us. She gave us a bed. And it was lovely. I slept at the feet. And it was warm. And gingerly, gingerly, my mother went to work the next day. And I was told that I have to go to school. And the lady, that-- the lovely landlady looked after my sister, who was not well. She was very sick, actually. And that's how we started our lives.

What kind of work was your mother able to find at first?

Household. She would stop somewhere in houses, apparently. That's what she told me. And she was actually proud of being able to learn how to help ladies at home. They needed work help. So she would stop there. And never-- I don't-- never seen one. But she told me how she did it. And they all needed help. So they just cleaning the house, just like a cleaning lady. And that meant that she also got a little food because the food was very short. And that's how we started our life there.

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And as I said-- and I had to go to school and, of course, to church on Sunday. So the information I had was that I have to cross myself after dipping my right hand in holy water. I had to cross myself, and coming in, and coming out. And that's all I knew.

But in the school, the religious part was taught by a priest. And what he gave us was a little booklet called Catechism, which gave us-- gave me questions and answers, questions and answers. So I swallowed that book because it gave me so much information. That saved me. So I was a little bit knowledgeable. And that's how we started to live.

Halina, do you recall whether or not-- there you are, learning this catechism. I think you had-- we have a photograph, in fact, of you. Tell us what this photograph is.

Well, eventually, they prepared me for communion. I was at the age. I didn't expect-- nine or 10, I think. When there was time for communion, there were three of us. And the three of us were taught. And we had a special time where we went up to the altar close. We had the lily. And we had the picture of Jesus. And we were given communion. And well, I wondered what I should be thinking because I knew I was Jewish. But I felt that this was very important. And this was beautiful religion, but not mine. But it was my job to just play this role.

And did anybody, any of your classmates-- do you remember if anybody had any suspicions that you were that you remember? No.

No.

You just-- you played it beautifully, it sounds like.

Well, they didn't expect me. They didn't-- simply, they didn't expect that. And so I was very, very careful. And so was my mother. My mother was worried about my sister's hair because it was very curly. And the Polish girls-- straight blonde hair. Mine was quite wavy. And they put it into plates-- plaits-- plaits, they used to call it. And they did that. But my sister's, what-- she was so worried about that that she shaved her head altogether a couple of times, claiming that it will make it thicker when they grow.

And Halina, in the meantime, while you're going to school and doing all that you're doing to be as careful as you can, your mother is taking other jobs. And at one point, she was going to volunteer to go work in Germany.

Yes. Well, she felt that-- she was always worried because the Polish people are very good at recognizing Jews. And she knew that the Germans always welcomed workers. So she thought, if we go to Germany for work, it will be safer because the Germans are not so good at recognizing Jews.

But we were turned down because of my sister. We would have had to leave my sister because she was too small. Because I could work and she could work. But my sister was a baby. And my mother would not leave my sister, obviously. So we didn't go. But then she never gave up. So she decided that she was going to simply walk into the German military camp and ask for a job-- and the chutzpah that was.

Oh, yeah.

Yes. But she felt that might be very helpful to have the Ausweis, the ID, showing that she's working for the Germans.

And that's what we see here, her Ausweis, right?

Asked for our papers. And this is the other thing my mother worried about. We had some weeks when we didn't know whether they're going to come and kill us or not. But no, they did not. They didn't have computers in those days. And she got the Ausweis. And she became-- she worked there. Her job was to peel potatoes for the troops.

For the troops.

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But that's OK. The main thing was that she had the Ausweis and like in-- there was occasion where they came into our-- where we were living, and night, and throw everybody out-- raus, raus. And they were going to check everybody. They were looking for one of the sons of our landlady, who apparently was going to-- they were going-- they were looking for him because he killed pigs for a living, which was a death sentence. So they never found him. But they were looking.

At the same time, they threw everybody out. And they were going to take them to Gestapo to check them out. And then my mother showed them the Ausweis. And they said, oh, no, you stay. So we stayed. So I said that saved us know that and gave us a little bit of assurance that she has an Ausweis. She works for the Germans. So she has a little bit of a protection.

And in that particular raid, the woman, the washer woman who brought you in, she was eventually released and came back, right?

Everybody came back. They were all fine. But we were spared that. For us to go to a Gestapo station would have been very traumatic.

Absolutely. Halina, we have a video question from a student, Vanessa, from George Mason University. So let's let Vanessa ask you a question.

Hi, Halina. My name is Vanessa Gutierrez. My pronouns are she, her, and hers. And I'm currently a junior at George Mason University here in Fairfax, Virginia. My question is having to live as Catholics, have you felt a disconnection to your own identity? Thank you.

No, I did not feel at all disconnected. I knew that if I wanted to live, I had to do a good job pretending to be somebody else. And I felt that this was completely my right to do. And I did a good job. But I knew I was not Catholic. I sometimes wished I could be because it was a very beautiful religion. But I knew I wasn't.

We had another picture that's sort of appropriate to what you just said.

Yes.

Tell us about this.

Well, Christmastime-- and you see my sister with the curly hair. And I enjoyed everything very much. And it was a time where we had to keep quiet about our own. We were not observant so it did not really hurt me at all. And I learned about other people and other religions. It was a good time to learn. But I knew at all times that I was not Catholic.

Halina, during this time you're in Jaroslaw, your mother received news about your father and what had happened to him after he was sent to Siberia. Will you share with us what she heard about your father?

Yes. She was very careful about being in touch with the people we left behind. But this was a very important letter that came through for us through the Red Cross. And they felt that it was absolutely a must to let her know. And what it was was my father said, in his letter, he was safe with his sister in Palestine, which meant that he was out of Russia. And that meant that he was free. But unfortunately, it was lovely news for us, but we couldn't--

You couldn't do anything about it.

As long as we were occupied, of course.

Right. Halina, before we go on, we have a question and a comment from a viewer named Naomi. Naomi asks or says-- asks, what kinds of things did your mother teach you to help you be brave, strong, understand, and be resilient? Well, she-- was your childhood lost? Or was she able to help you remain children while in hiding? Thank you for sharing your memories. They are so precious.

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Well, thank you very much for the question. My mother taught by example. So she was brave. She was always willing to give of herself. And she was always straight with me. We were like-- I grew up very quickly. And we were like partners. We were working together to stay alive.

And I never worried about my mother being-- telling me tales about or giving me the wrong information. I knew the dangers. Everything was open. And I felt that this was my duty as the older daughter and her only partner in this whole thing. And I was very proud to be able to be her support.

And I only wish that she had lived long enough afterwards to be able to see her children grow up. But she was so-- she was so entrenched in this-- the children must be saved, must be saved. And I cannot say that I appreciated that. How can you not? A mother like that is worth everything.

Absolutely.

Yes.

Absolutely. Halina, let me just remind our audience that if they have any questions for you, to please, use the chat feature to send them in to you. In July 1944, as the Soviets were driving the Germans west, they drove them out of Jaroslaw, which meant that you were caught for a period between two armies. Tell us what you remember about that time.

Well, first of all, we had no way of knowing what was going on in the front. We didn't know who was winning, who was losing, nothing. It was death penalty to watch TV, not to-- BBC, to listen to the BBC--

Listen to radio.

--or papers. Mind you, we didn't have any anyway. So one morning, we woke up, my mother was ready to get up and go to work, and usually, very early on. This is a farm town. So there were carts going back and forth, back and forth. It was completely quiet on the road. There was nothing moving. And my mother was saying, I don't know whether I should go. I don't know what's happening.

And I was standing by the window with my hand on the railing. My mother was over there with my sister. And suddenly, there was a tremendous bang and a bomb split up over the house. And a shrapnel hit me. And I started screaming. Mom, Mom, my hand, my hand. And my mother grabbed my sister and grabbed me. And my hand was bleeding.

She looked for help to pick me up, but there was nobody. And the hospital wasn't that far. We had to walk. And it was absolute silence on the street, nothing. Finally, we got to the hospital, they told us that the Russians were coming in. But they were taking their time. So right at that moment, so there was nothing. It was just quiet.

And they immediately, unfortunately, had to cut off my left finger because it was on the skin. Today, they would have put it back, but not in those days. So I lost my thumb on my left hand and a half a little finger. And the rest of the hand was very, very bad. And they had to put it on a railing so that it wouldn't-- when you lose fingers, so it goes like that. So you had to keep your hand up. So I was on the rail for two months in the hospital.

The nuns were the nurses, the wonderful nurses. And they were very worried about it getting infected. If they had-- they said, if the hand gets infected, that means that they would have to amputate my hand. So that was very, very scary.

In the meantime, my mother, after spending the night with us at the hospital the first night, she went back to where we were living. And she found out that the roof over the kitchen fell down on the lady that was keeping us and killed her. And the whole place was in shambles. There was nowhere-- nothing, nothing left. And she couldn't live there.

But there was a neighbor-- the house where we were in the middle. The neighbor on one side took her in with my sister. And so she stayed there as long as I was in the hospital. And in the meantime, there was a lot of shooting going on. I

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remember that that night, the people used to get up and go out in order not to be in the building, in the hospitals, in case there was a bomb falling. But nothing happened. And I slept. I sleep very well.

You remained in that hospital for two months.

Correct, yes.

How did your mom manage to be able to feed herself and your little sister during that time?

She started knitting, knitting for money, and also, to look for my father because, as I said, he-- we knew that he was in Palestine. So she started knitting for that and for keeping us. And she was-- she would come and tell me about all this. And eventually, she managed to contact him. And the lady who kept us was very, very nice. And she kept us-- as long as we were there, she was going to keep us. I stayed in the hospital. My mother was with her.

With your sister.

Yes, with my sister.

Halina, your mother, of course, was very determined to get you and your sister out of Poland. And she, as you said, she was able to locate your father in Palestine. I might share that after his deportation, after his sentence to Siberia, he was able to join the Polish armed forces that were operating in exile there. They called it Anders' Army is what it was known as.

And it eventually came under British command. And because of that, this allowed your family to emigrate to England. Tell us about going to England and what it was like for you to adjust to this new life after the Holocaust. And here you are, I believe, in England.

That's correct. That's correct.

Yes, it wasn't easy. But we were free. I was still petrified of the police. But we were in-- near Liverpool in a camp. It was actually a soldiers' camp they used because they needed barracks for us all. They were very nice and kind. As I said, they tried to teach us English. They tried to-- they did all sorts of helpful things. They gave us the rations. We could get some clothes.

And altogether, they were preparing us for settling in England, not knowing where we would choose. But my father and mother decided to go to London. Most of us did go to London. And you bought a house there on the never, never, as my mother used to call it. We were never on credit in Europe in those days. But my mother has always called the credit never, never.

And you bought a house. And you lived on one level. And the other two levels, you rented out to get the money to pay for the mortgage. That's how it went. And the first thing, of course, schools-- I wanted to go to the Polish school because there was a Polish school in London. But my mother said, no, you have to learn English now. You've got to go to an English school. So I did.

Halina, before we continue, there's a couple of comments I want to share with you. One is going to be a real surprise. But before I get to that one, a viewer named Douglas asks, Halina-- well, actually, a comment-- Halina, thank you so much for sharing what must be terribly difficult memories. Your mother was extraordinarily resilient and inspiring.

That's right.

Wishing you peace from Douglas. Now, here's the other comment. This is from your son, Joe. And Joe is commenting. And Joe says, can you please ask my mom how she feels that her mom channels herself through my mom even to this day?

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How does-- how she feels that--

How do you feel about your mom channeling herself through you even to this day?

Oh, well, I don't know. But I do-- I feel that I carry her with me. And I feel that if I'm in trouble, that there's somehow, somewhere, say, she's there. I don't know. I'm not religious. I am-- as my mother used to say, there is some strength over there that is there. And I think, if we live a good life, I think, we deserve to be rewarded by that. All I know is that I've had a very nice life and that anytime I'm in trouble, I manage to get out of it. And he knows.

He knows.

And Halina, there is one more photograph that, in the time we have left, I want you to tell us about this because it's extraordinary-- not just because of the photograph, but what it represents.

Yes. That represents a lot. When-- there were no social workers to help us like here. There was no help whatsoever. I had to get over the fact that my hand-- and altogether not knowing the language. They would make fun of you if you didn't say the word right in England. They were very fussy. And I wanted to play tennis, frankly. That was my favorite game. But there were no facilities.

But everywhere, I got school-- school and clubs. And everywhere, there was a table for table tennis. It was very early stages in those days. But people played. I didn't know very well how to speak English. I didn't know the English people, the English young people. And luckily, where we bought the house, very close by, there was a club, a Maccabi club-- this was for Jewish youth.

And immediately, I went and signed up. And there was a table. And I started playing. And the boys started teaching me. I never had a proper teacher, but the boys were pretty good. And they started teaching me. And I started getting better. We all organized. We had teams that we went. We played other clubs. And this was wonderful because it was also social and community-- an all in one.

And there came 1953. And Israel was, of course, by then created in 1945. So Israel started doing the Maccabiah Games, which is the equivalent to Olympic Games. And they are every four years, like the Olympic Games, but for Jewish youth from all over the world. And that was when I was-- I don't know how, but they chose me to represent England. And the two boys that are behind were somewhere-- that is already in Israel. And so I got to go to Israel for the first time in 1953 to be part of the Maccabiah Games.

And so here you are, taking up a sport which was a suitable sport, given the damage that had been done to your hand. You could do this. And you became a champion in England and a champion in Israel, so a remarkable legacy of your mother channeling through you in this as well.

Halina, before we get to the closing here soon, a couple more comments. Mr. [PERSONAL NAME] class in Danbury, Connecticut asks, what kept you going insane during this time? How did you feel the day the war ended? What gave you the-- what gave you your strength?

Oh, my mother.

Your mother.

My mother, always my mother, yes. It was always my mother. And well, after all being in such a terrible situation, we were afraid of everything. And suddenly, we were free. And it took a while to get used to it. And it wasn't easy. The English are not very acceptable, especially, they don't like foreigners at all. They're surrounded by water. And they don't-- they really were very isolated from other peoples. So we were sort of a new characters there.

But I must say that they were fair. And they-- as I said, they shared what they had, which wasn't much. They were very bombed out. But I found that there were good people. So we managed to get on with our lives as well. And as I said,

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you see, we could follow various things, like table tennis, or schools, and whatever we needed to get involved and to try to live a normal life.

Very unfortunately, my mother, who had been already operated on breast cancer in Poland after my hand was hurt, got it again. And we lost her. And that was 1956. And that was a very, very hard day for me. But that also meant that I decided that the next Maccabiah Games, which I went again, I would stay in Israel. And I did stay for many years. And then we came to the United States.

Halina, and we have so little time left. But I do have one more question for you.

Yes.

In the face of rising global antisemitism, please tell us why you continue to share your firsthand account of what you experienced during the Holocaust.

Well, as you heard a couple of comments already, it is very important to share a first witness like that because there is a lot of talk about this hadn't happened. It was-- we made it up. I lived through it. I'm a witness. And I have to honor my mother and the six million that lost their lives-- the six million included one and a half million children. And when I think that, I just want to cry.

And so it's so important for me to let you know what happened. And so you know, if somebody tells you it didn't happen, you can always send them to me. I will confirm that it has. And I think that there are good people, lots of good people, who, I think, can help me once they know the truth to spread it and spread it. So we can get on with our lives and not try to say that it didn't happen. Just accept it and try to do better. That's what I would like to say.

Halina, you say that so eloquently. We are profoundly grateful that you still are willing to do this, to share what you went through, to help educate and inform those who don't have this knowledge that you have. Thank you. And of course, you have made us all deeply, deeply aware of what a wonderful, remarkable woman your mother was and that you've carried her legacy forward. So thank you for being our first person today, Halina, so very much.

Thank you very much for having me. And thank you for coming. And I hope that it helps in your futures as well. And then you can carry this message to others, please. It's very, very important for our children's future.

Thank you, Halina. I'd like to take a moment to thank our donors. First Person is made possible through the generous support of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation. And I'd like to also ask you to join us again next month, when we have our next First Person program. On March 16, 2022 at 1:00 PM Eastern Time, we'll have a conversation with Holocaust survivor and museum volunteer, Susan Warsinger.

Susan was nine years old when her neighbors smashed a brick through her bedroom window on the night of November 9, 1938. This night would become known as Kristallnacht, or the Night of the Broken Glass. Join us next month to hear how Susan's parents used their savings to smuggle Susan and her brother Joseph out of Germany to a children's home in a Paris suburb.

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