United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
First Person: Conversations with Holocaust Survivors
First Person Estelle Laughlin
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>> Bill Benson: Good morning, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us today. We are in our 18th year of *First Person*. Our First Person today is Mrs. Estelle Laughlin, whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2017 season of *First Person* is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

First Person is a series of conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue twice weekly through mid-August. The museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Estelle will share with us her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask her questions at the end of the program.

Today's program will be livestreamed on the museum's website. This means people will be joining the program via a link from the museum's website and watching with us today from across the country and around the world. Recordings of all *First Person* programs will be made available on the museum's Youtube channel.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Estelle is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Estelle Laughlin was born in Warsaw, Poland, on July 9, 1929. Poland is highlighted on this map of Europe in 1933. Warsaw is highlighted on this map of Poland, also in 1933.

Estelle was the younger of two sisters. In addition to her parents, her family included many aunts, uncles, and cousins. The Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Soon after the invasion Estelle and her family were forced to move into the Warsaw Ghetto. This photo was taken when Estelle came to the U.S.

In 1943, the family went into hiding in a bunker in the ghetto. The Warsaw Ghetto

Uprising began on April 19, 1943, and continued until the final liquidation of the ghetto on May 16, 1943. Jewish fighters faced overwhelmingly superior forces of the Germans but were able to hold them off for a month.

Estelle and her family were hiding in a bunker during the uprising and were among those who were discovered and forced out of hiding. We see here an historical photograph of German soldiers leading Jews captured during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising to the assembly point for deportation in May 1943.

After they were discovered, Estelle and her family were deported to the Majdanek extermination camp where Estelle's father was killed. The location of Majdanek is highlighted on this map of extermination camps in Poland. Estelle, her mother and sister endured labor in two more camps before eventually being liberated by the Russians.

Estelle, her mother and sister emigrated to the United States in 1947 on the Marine Flasher. We close with Estelle's immigration certificate, which was issued in July 1947.

When Estelle, her sister and mother arrived in New York in 1947, they had $30 between them. Estelle and her sister went to work in the garment district. She met her husband, who was a survivor from Berlin, in New York. After marrying, they moved to Cleveland where her husband was a labor organizer.

After the birth of her second son, Estelle began attending college in Cleveland and finished after they moved to the Washington, D.C. area in 1961, when her husband joined the Kennedy Administration. Estelle became a teacher in Montgomery County, Maryland, earned a Master's Degree and became a Reading Specialist. She retired in 1992. Her husband died in 2008.

Estelle's three sons are very accomplished. One is a professor of geology, another is a psychologist, and the third has his own business. Between them, they have given Estelle seven grandchildren; one for each day of the week, as she notes. She now has her second great-grandchild with the addition of a great-granddaughter who is now 1 month old. She moved five years ago from the Washington, D.C. area to Chicago to be close to family.

Estelle volunteers with the museum's Speakers Bureau. Until her 2011 move to Chicago, she was also a member of the Survivors Writing Group and a contributor to the Museum's publication, "Echoes of Memory." She has written a book about her and her family's experience during the Holocaust entitled, "Transcending Darkness: a Girl's Journey Out of the Holocaust." It was a finalist for the 2012 ForeWord Reviews Book of the Year Awards. She is in the final stages of finishing her second book, a work of fiction about the Warsaw Ghetto with a working title of "Stateless." Following our program today, Estelle will sign copies of "Transcending Darkness."

With that, I would like you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Estelle Laughlin.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Ready? Thank you.

Thank you, Estelle, so much for joining us and being willing to be our First Person today, traveling in from Chicago to join us. You have just so much to try to tell news a short period so we will start right away.

You were just 10 in Warsaw when War II began with Germany's invasion of Poland September 1, 1939. Before we turn to all that would happen to you and your family during the war and the Holocaust, start first with a little bit about your family, and you, and your life before the war began.

>> Estelle Laughlin: I was born in Warsaw, Poland, to a middle-class family. In my selective

memory were glows in radiance of lilac trees against open blue skies, with sounds of good neighbors, fabulous cousins and family, kindness and trust and love.
>> Bill Benson: From what you've told me and what I read in your book, your father -- you were extremely close to your father. Tell us a little bit about him.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, my father was a very nurturing, a very -- our parents imprinted themselves on us. And my father taught me my values, taught me to trust, taught me to love. He taught me to embrace all of humanity. That trust, that love, that foundation helped me survive with love and compassion and joy of life. Life should be lived joyfully.
>> Bill Benson: Your mother fled from violence and anti-Semitism in Russia, hadn't she?
>> Estelle Laughlin: My mother reflected the Jewish people. Persecution is not new to Jewish people. Jewish people were chased from -- they were welcomed and started life one year and the next year they were kicked out. And my mother was raised in a shtetle in a small town in Russia. She was kicked out during World War I and came to Poland. She also taught me compassion. Even though she was persecuted, she would tell us that the Russian people were very suffering people. So she was also very compassionate and loved nature and impressed that on us, too.
>> Bill Benson: When Germany invaded Poland September 1, 1939, starting World War II, Warsaw was attacked that very day. What do you remember of that first day and then of the siege of Warsaw that followed?
>> Estelle Laughlin: So the sad thing for the day was that the people in Poland were aware that we were threatened. We heard about the Nazi aggressions, invasion of Sudetenland. We felt that we were so prepared for war yet war was an abstraction.

The very first day it was a peaceful, beautiful day and suddenly there was this tremendous explosion as though all the air was sucked out of the world. The earth trembled. And then there was silence. And then sirens and we turned on the radio and we heard the announcement that bombs were dropped on Warsaw and that we were at war without declaring war. And in a few seconds I changed from being a child to being an adult and carrying the burdens that war puts on children.
>> Bill Benson: Still, Warsaw held out for a full month following the German invasion of Poland. You wrote that after the German Army marched into Warsaw on October 1, 1939, immediately "My life changed beyond imagination." Tell us about those changes.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, I turned 10 when Germany invaded Poland. Immediately my life changed beyond recognition. My once peaceful streets were now patrolled by foreign soldiers. They shouted insults and cruelties. They snapped whips in our homes and streets. They isolated us in a tiny ghetto and built a thick wall around us. They filled the ghetto with people driven out from surrounding areas. Most people came on foot, most without a penny in their pocket, many without shoes on their feet. Most died of cold and hunger and Typhus. In the streets, people covered the bodies of dead people with posters saying "Our children must live," "Children are the holiest things."

Yet, in this inferno people fought heroically to hold on to their values to hold on to the meaning that was most essential to us. To own a book was an act of defiance, was considered a capital crime yet all over the ghetto people had secret libraries.
>> Bill Benson: Your father was one of them, right?
>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. My father had a stash of his favorite books by Yiddish authors, by Shalom Aleichem and Shalom Asch. Nights windows blinded with covers to keep our existence secret in a small room illuminated by carbide light. We had no electricity. My father would pull

out a stash of his books and read to us, bringing to life remote worlds.

We even had theaters. I didn't mention that the Jewish community immediately organized itself into a widespread self-aid center to support and help the neediest among us. And the self-aid center supported theater. Theaters, imagine theaters when we had no bread.

There was a wonderful author and historian in the Warsaw Ghetto. His name was Chaim Kaplan and he said that it is remarkable when we don't seem to need it at all, we need poetry more than we need bread. And it is true. I think our souls need to be nourished. I think our ability to express ourselves, to think for ourselves is our Godliness.

Guns hovering over our heads did not stop us from celebrating holidays. We pulled the window shades down and we celebrated. All over the ghetto heroic teachers met with children in little rooms and taught them to hold on to their imaginations and trust and love.

>> Bill Benson: And all of that, the theater and the poetry, was all done clandestinely.

>> Estelle Laughlin: It was all done at the risk -- it was a capital crime. Capital offense, yes.

>> Bill Benson: In the ghetto there was a large wall built around the ghetto to enclose you. Can you say a little bit about that?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, imagine that your horizon is closed, that you are imprisoned. There isn't really much more to say than how terribly undignified the slum of life was.

>> Bill Benson: I was struck, Estelle, by something you wrote. You wrote that children followed adult examples to resist barbaric laws. "In our apartment complex there was no child over 10 who did not have some public duty." Can you say more about that?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. Well, we are shaped by our community. And as I pointed out, there was tremendous moral resistance. Our children modeled the behavior of adults. We hid our books under our clothes. You know, now I recognize what the heroic act it was but we as children did not give it a second thought. But we did walk by -- you know, we knew if we were caught, we would be shot, our parents would be shot, and so would our teachers.

And children volunteered -- in my book I describe how children collected clothes and food and put on shows, and raised money for needier children. So there was a tremendous morale resistance in holding on to one's self.

Another interesting thing about the ghetto was -- I may be incorrect but I think that we were allowed like 81-calories a day. But I am not sure about the number. But I know that it was less than 10% of the required minimum daily calorie need. And there was smuggling. We were completely enclosed by the wall and there was a curfew. We were constantly watched. But yet there was smuggling.

And you know, children no older than 8 or 10-year-old kids would smuggle -- would remove bricks from the wall and do smuggling. And the wall, of course, was stained with blood. If the child was caught, there was -- if he managed to get through, there was food for the day. There was also more -- there was also larger-scale smuggling. And that was done by bribery, the Nazi guards filled their pockets with bribery. So there was some trade, some black market trade in the ghetto.

>> Bill Benson: Which is how you were able to survive.

>> Estelle Laughlin: And this is how we were able to survive, many of us. Most were not.

>> Bill Benson: The Nazis started deporting large numbers of Jews out of Warsaw to the concentration camps in 1942. For a period of time your family was able to avoid being deported. How were your parents able to manage to keep you from being taken by the Nazis and how did you survive during that time of all of those deportations?

>> Estelle Laughlin: In July 1942, the month of my 13th birthday, the infamous deportations of

the Warsaw Ghetto began. We had no idea that the deportations meant death. We were told that we were to be resettled. Some Jewish people were forced to write false letters to their families, inviting them to places where they were fed and sheltered and taken care of. So you can imagine that many destitute people marched willingly in an unknowing death.

Warsaw was an ancient city. Most people lived in apartment buildings. So where does one hide in an apartment building? Pretty much where children play hide and go seek. We hid behind couches. People hid under beds. They hid in cardboard cupboards, in drawers. They hid wherever they could vanish from sight. My family, we obscured one room by putting a wardrobe in front of the door.

While we were hiding, between July 1942 and September 1942, in the near two months, 99% of the children disappeared. Can you imagine a world without the sound of children, without the presence of mother, grandmothers and grandfathers? Because old people and children were the first to be killed. I was among the 1% of children still alive. And we never heard from the people who were dragged away, but a few people managed to come under the cover of the night back to the ghetto and they told us about these horrendous train rides to a place called Treblinka where our people were gassed.

It is so hard for me to imagine that anyone who loves their mothers and fathers and children can do such a horrendous thing. This is why I'm here to share this story. And I believe that this is why you are all here. Because question -- we have to be reminded from time to time that human beings are capable of such utter cruelty and in the recognition appreciate so much more the value and the importance of love.

>> Bill Benson: Estelle, as you just said, 99% of the children were gone. The Nazis had essentially decreed that children under the age of 14 were useless to them.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You were 13.

>> Estelle Laughlin: I was 13. My father thought what would happen if they would come after me because I was contraband, forbidden to exist. And my father said, well, if they come after you, I'll burn their eyes out with acid; I won't let them take you away from me. I believed him that I was safe if only in his love.

>> Bill Benson: At some point, Estelle, you and your family were still in the ghetto. It had been divided, I think in 1943, into three sub-ghettos.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You went to work in a German factory. Will you tell us about that?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Ok. There were just a few Jewish people who were allowed to exist and they were classified as the useful ones and the others were contraband, were forbidden to exist. And, of course, they were called the wild ones. Now, at that point in the ghetto most of the people were deported. The deportations were carried out with 20th Century know-how and stone age values people disappeared in tremendous numbers every day. I think towards the end it was like 2,000 people a day.

I forgot the question.

>> Bill Benson: You were forced to go to work in a factory.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. So the people who were legal, a very small number, were employed -- there were three sub-ghettos. So the ghetto was virtually deserted. It was like a haunted place. It was so quiet. I remember -- we lived in an apartment building. We were the only family in the entire apartment building still alive. I would sometimes walk out into the courtyard and open the gate and listen, hoping that I would hear a sound of life, of a neighbor,

of a friend. The silence was so palpable it was crawling at us.

Now, the people, there were three sub-ghettos. And the people who were allowed to live, the useful ones, worked in a factory. My mother, sister, and I were fortunate enough to work, without any pay. It was a privilege because you were legally alive. So we worked in one of those shops, mending uniforms.

>> Bill Benson: German uniforms.

As the ghetto was being liquidated or more and more deportations, and it was emptying out, your family moved and created a bunker on the ground floor of. Tell us about it.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. Now, at the point when the people, the remainder of the people, became aware of Treblinka, they began to organize themselves to armed resistance. At that point organizing yourself in armed resistance made sense. So they built a network of bunkers. My father was a member of the underground, so we moved from our apartment on the second floor to the ground floor so that we could build a bunker, too.

So they built a network of bunkers. And they also dug tunnels between the bunkers for navigation. They also built a tunnel under the wall in order to get to the Christian side and get arms from the Christian underground. They also used the sewer. The sewer was a very useful means of communication.

So we had a bunker. The entrance to our bunker had to be, of course, secret. So the trap door was the powder room floor, less commode and all.

>> Bill Benson: All under the commode.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. And our existence would be in this netherworld.

>> Bill Benson: And once the Warsaw uprising began, which was an extraordinary event, there you were hidden away. What was it like for you in the bunker? What was that like?

>> Estelle Laughlin: In April 1943, events erupted that Nazi tanks, armored cars, bomber planes, with humungous loud speakers announcing that we better all report for resettlement. Of course, we knew what resettlement meant so when we heard that, we lifted our trap door, went down to flimsy ladder into the dismal basement, pulled the trap door down. I felt abandoned. The ceiling pressed down on me. The damp floor -- walls closed in on me. The flickering of the carbide lights was our substitute for the sun. The ticking of the clock was our only clue when morning was rising and night was falling. The few people in the bunker with us was my whole nation.

While we were in that bunker, fighting broke out in the streets facing a 20th Century Army, armed from head to toe, facing armored cars, tanks, bomber planes. It was a handful of poorly armed, poorly clad, poorly fed freedom fighters. They climbed up on rooftops they stepped in front of open windows, climbed out of the bunkers, faced the tanks and bombs falling, incendiary bombs.

What is remarkable is that it took -- the freedom fighters, the handful of fighters fought longer than it took France or Poland to capitulate.

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that when the edict was given to abolish the ghetto, it was to be done in three days as a gift to Hitler for his birthday and it took 30 days, took a month to accomplish.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Right. In January 1943, there were a few skirmishes. The deportations were resumed but the freedom fighters put on a fight and they fought for four days. The Germans were completely unprepared for it, so they withdrew. And Himmler promised Hitler that for his birthday he would deliver within three days -- the present would be to cleanse Warsaw of all Jewish people. So it was cleansed in three days.

>> Bill Benson: How were you found, Estelle? You were in a bunker but eventually you were found.
>> Estelle Laughlin: At some point a grenade was thrown at the ceiling over us and we were dragged out. At that point there was no place to hide anymore. They dragged us out into the streets. The buildings were crumbling to our feet, enormous tons of flames were licking the sky and painting it in other worldly colors of iridescence, plumes of smoke. And they dragged us to Umschlagplatz. We did not march like a storm of nameless people of we were people with dreams, people with hope. Children sometimes asked me how did feel inside and I tell them that I felt no different than they feel or my grandchildren feel. I, too, wanted to catch a ball flying in the air. I, too, wanted to feel the damp grass under my feet. I, too, wanted to take my family and my friends for granted, as all the people should. And they marched us to Umschlagplatz in congealed blood, people in congealed blood all around us. They loaded us on to freight trains.
>> Bill Benson: And from there you ould go to Majdanek. Tell us about going to Majdanek and about your father.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, Majdanek, we arrived after a night ride in the car in a freight train. They were pelting just for the sport bullets into the cars that people were all around us. Majdanek, the thorns of electrified barbed-wire fences marked the end of our horizon. In front of us was the crematorium and the chimneys and the smoke and the stench of human flesh. And if that wasn't enough, in the assembly field there was a gibbet from which, gallows from which our people were hanging. And my father was gassed there. My mother, sister, and I -- I was 13. My sister was 14 1/2 years old. My father was gassed.

My mother was the only mother that I am aware of. We were the only family of three people, which made us very, very fortunate because everyone else, as far as I know, was alone. My mother, my sister and I survived Majdanek by a fluke of luck. My sister was beaten very badly and she was put on a list. Our assumption was that her name on the list indicated that she was to go to the gas chamber. The three of us had a pact that if one of us would be gassed, all three of us would go. It was more frightening to us to be separated than facing death. I know for me, my feeling was that -- I didn't understand what death was but I wanted so much -- my biggest dream at that point was to make the transition to death holding on to my mother's hand and my sister's hand. So the only logical thing was for my mother and me to trade places with two other women who hoped to see another sunrise.

And the following day when the names were called, my sister's name, and then the names of the two other women, my mother and I reported with the group of people. And absolutely sure that we are being walked to the gas chamber but instead we were loaded on to a freight train and taken to Skarzysko.

There was an distinction between an extermination camp and slave labor camp.. An extermination camp was a factory of killing people. A slave labor camp people also died but from extreme labor, lack of food. Slave labor camps also were enclosed by electrified barbed-wire fences and towers with guards and dogs, German Shepherds. To this day I'm afraid of dogs. And lights that followed every step that we took.
>> Bill Benson: Let me ask you one more question about Majdanek. I believe it was at Majdanek you had a photograph of your father.
>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us what happened.
>> Estelle Laughlin: When we were unloaded off the freight trains and marched, I was sure

that we were going to the gas chamber. We were given the soap, had to go through showers, the showers of disinfectant. We were sure that it was death. We didn't scream. We didn't cry. Not because -- it's almost like people -- when you have an incurable illness, you want to make your death -- you want to face your death with dignity. I didn't cry because I didn't want to really show my tears to my enemies or to my punishers. I didn't cry because I wanted to protect my mother and sister.

So I digress. So when we were marched to the showers not knowing for sure that we'll be gassed, I still had our clothes on and shoes. I had one treasure left, which was a photographer of my father that I had in the lining of my shoe. I was a 13-year-old girl. A soldier stopped me and he says, "What are you hiding?" I said, "I'm not hiding anything." He said, "I know you're hiding something." So I thought if I'll be truthful, I'll have the best chance of saving the photograph of my father. So I said yes and I showed him the photograph. And he confiscated it.

>> Bill Benson: From there, as you said, you were sent to Skarzysko. There was an incident on your way to Skarzysko. Tell us about that. You were in the train.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Oh. Random luck. When we were on the freight train transported from Majdanek to Skarzysko, my sister had to go to the bathroom. So at some point there was a pit stop. My mother and I pleaded with my sister, oh, don't go because they might shoot you because there were the soldiers just shooting for the fun in the air or who knows at whom. But my sister said, "I have to go," so we didn't want to part and we went with her. Then they started to shoot to chase us into the train. We ran to the train but we entered a different car.

Skarzysko had three different camps. And one camp it was an armament factory where bullets were being produced. And one camp they were working on gunpowder which settled on the lungs and in the skin. And the people who ended up in that particular camp lived only like a month or at most two months because they suffocated from the gunpowder. And because we went to a different train than we originally were --

>> Bill Benson: Which was by accident.

>> Estelle Laughlin: By accident. We ended up in the camp that did not work on gunpowder. So that, too, was one of the random events that accounted for our survival.

>> Bill Benson: From what you told us already today, from what you wrote about, it's just such an understatement to say that your mother was a remarkable woman.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: There was an incident where she confronted one of the guards, which I think was instrumental in saving your sister's life.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Well, not really.

>> Bill Benson: Ok.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Not really. It was just that -- the camp was located at some distance from the factory. So of course, we never saw much of the daylight. We worked from early morning till late at night.

You know, in this museum, when you walk out you will see that there is a sky light, the ceiling, which is really no accident. I'm digressing here but it just strikes me because when we were walking -- I'm a little bit coherent but it will all make sense in a minute. When we were walking from the camp to the factory, all I remember was darkness. And all I remember was the patch of sky that was my only connection to freedom, to life. And I thought I was the only one who remembered the patch of sky but the architect who built this museum interviewed survivors and apparently most of the survivors remembered that patch of sky. And this is why

we have this here at the museum.

So, as we marched on this dark place from work to camp, there was one kapo, a Jewish guard. The Germans told him to hit somebody. And my mother stepped out of the line and she said "One Jew does not hurt another Jew. If you touch him, your blood will rise from the grave and you will never know peace." So she had -- my sister and I thought she was absolutely mad. Well, we were in shock. That was my mother's courage. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: At Skarzysko you, your sister and your mother were referred to by the other inmates as the three monkeys. You thought about using that as the title of your book at one point. Why did they refer you as the three monkeys?

>> Estelle Laughlin: We were the only family of three in the group. We survived as one organism. We were covered with lice. We were covered with mange. And we picked lice off one another. So we were just clinging so together. So it was the people, our friends, our Holocaust bunker -- I mean camp sisters affectionately called us the three monkeys.

>> Bill Benson: From Skarzysko you were then sent to Czestochowa. And from there you would be liberated.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your liberation.

>> Estelle Laughlin: So that's January 1943. We were so -- that was from September 1939 to January 1943. We were so isolated. We might as well have been on a different planet. We could not imagine that only a few rabbit hops away from us people were sailing on silver lakes and children sat around tables with families as children should. And then suddenly one night we hear the rumbling of planes and we hear bombs falling. We say could it be after all of these years? Could it be? And we were liberated that morning.

That was the middle of January. Poland is quite cold. The ground was covered with snow and ice. All we had on was a loose cap. Amazing how much hunger and starvation, abuse human beings can endure and still remain human because we did survive with love for humanity and compassion and joy of life. The ground was covered with snow and ice. The wooden clogs, no underwear, freezing. We shuffled out of -- we saw the gates were open, which in itself, was intoxicating. The camp was surrounded by a no man's land. We shuffled out in the ice. We were so afraid because this was the front lines. What if the Nazis -- what if the German forces come back? It was like in a nightmare when you think that you want to run and you cannot move.

We shuffled. We went out and moved very, very gingerly, listening. We heard the tanks. We heard sounds of soldiers. We listened. And then when we recognized that they were Russian soldiers and we rushed towards them like one is to meet the messiah. We run up to them and we said, Oh, do you know how long we've been waiting for you? And they put out their hands and they said, Sorry, but we have a war to fight. And they did because this was January.

>> Bill Benson: January 1945.

>> Estelle Laughlin: 1945. And the war wasn't over until May. So they looked at their watches -- they gave us a slab of bread. They looked at their watches and they said you better find shelter before curfew. I don't know at this point if I was more afraid of dying of cold and starvation or of being put in jail for breaking our curfew. So we found shelter in an abandoned school. It was not easy.

From 1945 to 1947 we were stateless and homeless, and roaming through Poland. We were not welcomed. Many Polish people were afraid that the Jewish people might reclaim

maybe some properties. Anti-Semitism and prejudice against any people is pretty common everywhere, which is one of the reasons why this museum exists. This is one of the reasons why I'm here to share my story, to remind myself and all of us that humanity is one.

So we marched through Poland, through Czechoslovakia at that time, through Germany and eventually came to the United States.

>> Bill Benson: There's so much, so much, that I wish we had the time for you to tell us, including what you did during the period you're describing now. But if you don't mind, I would like you to share the incident where early after your liberation and you're trying to make it, you're with your mom and your sister and your mother buys a single piece of candy.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Oh. Well, all of that is a mouthful.

>> Bill Benson: Can you give a sneak preview?

>> Estelle Laughlin: Yes. We were wandering through Poland first. It was winter. There were no DP camps, displaced persons camps, we were completely on our own, not a penny, not a home to come back to.

Remind me of the question again.

>> Bill Benson: Your mother buying a piece of candy.

>> Estelle Laughlin: So my mother -- and we are afraid that we'll be stuck in this country that doesn't want us. We did not want -- my mother had siblings in the United States. Our dream was to somehow establish contact with them and to come here. So we hopped trains. I hopped, my mother hopped, and my sister hopped trains. We went to look for family. So we were on our way and we came to a town, Kelce. And there was a market. And we hadn't seen that much food, carrots, beets.

>> Bill Benson: And you had no money.

>> Estelle Laughlin: Potatoes, no money, and candy. We had maybe -- I think we found a few pennies, a few pennies. And we looked at all of this food and we are so hungry. And it's still winter. My mother says we have a -- we have a few cents and my mother said she will buy candy. So my sister and I thought, well, she's going to spend the last penny -- we thought you're out of your mind to buy the candy. So my mother bought the candy and we shared it. And she said she wanted us to taste the sweetness of life.

>> Bill Benson: And you each shared it.

>> Estelle Laughlin: And we shared it.

>> Bill Benson: We have time for a couple of questions from our audience. Before we do, I just wanted to share something you wrote in your book, if you don't mind. You wrote, "Our survival depended 99% on random luck and 1% on instinct and grit.” Without the 1% luck you were 100% dead. You've done an incredible job in a short time of helping us understand that.

So let's turn to our audience. I'm going to ask you if would stay with us for a couple of questions because we're going to end the program with Estelle sharing some final thoughts with us before we do. So please stay with us.

We have time for a couple of questions. We have microphones in both aisles. We ask that you take a microphone and then make your questions as brief as you can. I'll repeat it just to be sure that we hear it correctly up here. And then Estelle will respond to it.

Do we have anybody who would like to ask a question? We have one right down here. I think Jocelyn is coming down with the microphone.

There we go.

>> How did you survive as you were traveling in the months immediately after you were liberated? How did you get food?

>> Bill Benson: How did you survive in the months right after liberation? You described how cold it was. How did you make it?
>> Estelle Laughlin: I don't know how we survived except -- you know, people ask me sometimes was it hope that kept us alive and going. I guess that there is in all of us a current that wants to live. I know I wanted to live. I felt worthy of living. I think that this is a beautiful drive in all of us, the current and the love from life.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you.

Do we have another question? I think we have one right here.
>> Mrs. Laughlin, I want to say thank you, thank you for sharing your story. Many of us want our children to know about the horrors of the Holocaust. We are grateful for this museum. We are grateful for people like you who share their story and remind us the need of courage and love.

I guess what I want to say is I've heard -- I've seen the word random and randomness about the 1%, your survival, about that you didn't get on the train to go to the gunpowder factory. I'm wondering if you've considered that it wasn't random; that God had a plan for you and people like you to survive to tell the story of the horrors. I would ask that you comment.
>> Bill Benson: Asking for your comment about despite the comment about randomness, the role of God in your mind in saving you.
>> Estelle Laughlin: I am not a religious person but I am a very spiritual person. I feel very connected with all living things. My parents were humanists they were not religious but very, very connected with all life. I know that many people who held on to religion, religion represents the nobility, the goodness in us. I don't know how to define the fact that we survived but that it was really random luck, like when you scatter something on the ground and you pick it up something will happen to stay there. I don't feel that I was more deserving to survive than others were. I don't think that there's any justification for killing people. Life is sacred. It's noble. I don't feel -- I cannot explain why except that I know that it's wrong; that we are all one and what any one of us does affects everyone else.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Estelle.

I think that we're out of time for questions. I'm going to turn back to Estelle in a moment. Before I do, I'd like to thank you all for being with us. I remind you that we'll have a *First Person* program each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. We hope that you will come back. But if not, the museum's website will have information about the *First Person* program in 2018.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person has the last word. So I'll turn back to Estelle to do that. Before I do, I just want to let you know that when Estelle is done, our photographer, Joel, will come up on the stage and he's going to take a photograph of Estelle with you as the background. So we ask that you stay with us so that we can take that picture of Estelle.

I also would like to let you know, remind you, that when Estelle is done, she is going to go up to the doors at the top of the stairs where she will be available to sign copies of her book, "Transcending Darkness". It has a lot that we weren't able to get to today, I can tell you that.

Estelle?
>> Estelle Laughlin: Thank you all so very much for being here. Seldom are people willing to listen or to tell the stories because they generate such pain yet we have to be reminded from

time to time of the consequences to us and to humanity when we accommodate ourselves to tie tyrants, how it corrupts the conscience of a nation, what it does to love and what it does to trust.

As long as there are people who say that the Holocaust did not happen, in some ways Majdanek and Auschwitz are still with us. I am so grateful for this wonderful museum because the museum proves that history always remembers and we must listen if civilization is to progress.

Thank you again so much for being here.

>> [Applause]