United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
First Person: Conversations with Holocaust Survivors
First Person Julie Keefer
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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. Julie Keefer, 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.

I'm pleased to let you know that Mr. Louis Smith is in the front row with us today.
>> [Applause]
>> Bill Benson: *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 until mid-August. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

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

Julie Keefer was born Jula Weinstock to Jewish parents in Lwow, Poland, on April 19, 1941. This photograph of Julie is the only one that exists from her time in hiding.

On this map of Poland the arrow points to Lwow, where Julie was born.

In this photograph, Julie's father, Herman, is the man farthest to the left in the back row and her mother, Sala, is the woman farthest to the left in the front row. Julie's parents also would have a younger daughter named Tola.

In June 1941, Germans occupied Lwow. German and Ukrainian authorities forced all Jews into a ghetto, including Julie and her family. On this map of Lwow, the white arrow points to the location of the ghetto.

Julie's grandfather, Aizik, was arrested and made a forced laborer. After working at a lime quarry, they moved him to Janowska labor camp, indicated here with the red arrow. He escaped from this labor camp. Learning that the Lwow ghetto would be destroyed, he helped Julie and her parents and her sister hide in a bunker in a nearby forest with 30 other Jews from Lwow. He then moved Julie and her sister to live with his non-Jewish friend, Lucia, because he feared the girls' crying would give their hiding spot away. In March 1942, the Germans deported thousands of Jews who had remained in the Lwow ghetto to the Belzec killing center. They boarded trains from the Kleptarow train station indicated here with the blue arrow.

This photograph shows Lucia Nowicki on the left and Aizik on the right. Aizik assumed the identity of Lucia's husband, and they introduced Julie and her sister as her nieces. Aizik traveled back and forth between Lucia's house and the forest to help the people in hiding there. At one point Lucia was arrested by Security Police. With Lucia in prison, Aizik hid Julie's sister in a Catholic children children's home. When Lucia was released from prison, she returned home and cared for Julie.

One day while Aizik was visiting Lucia in town, the Germans found the bunker in the forest and killed everyone hidden there, including Julie's parents. At the end of the war, as Soviet troops approached, the Germans evacuated the Catholic children's home where Julie's sister lived. Aizik and Julie were unable to find Julie's sister after the war.

This photograph shows Julie, the older girl on the left, Aizik, Lucia, and Julie's friend in a Displaced Persons camp after the war.

Aizik sent Julie to America in 1948, hoping to join her later. Julie lived in a children's home for six years until a couple from Cleveland, Ohio, adopted her. Aizik married Lucia and they eventually immigrated to the United States and settled in New York.

Following Julie's adoption by Thea and Fred Klestadt at age 16 in 1957 and her graduation from high school, Julie attended Oberlin College in Ohio where she majored in French with minors in Spanish and art. While at Oberlin Julie met Larry Keefer whom she married on June 24, 1962, 55 years ago. Julie furthered her education with a Master's degree in special education to work with emotionally disturbed adolescents and did Ph.D-level study in human growth and development. She studied psychology at the University of Nebraska. After Julie and Larry moved to the Washington, DC area, she continued her studies at Bowie State University and several other academic institutions.

Julie spent 29 years with the Montgomery County Maryland Public School System retiring in 2001. Over the course of those three decades she held a number of key positions including Mainstream Coordinator working with special needs students and teachers at several high schools, and participated in teacher training programs, some in conjunction with American University. All of them dealt with education equity. Among her many accomplishments she created LUPE, an anti-gang program to improve academic performance among Hispanic students at an area high school. A memorable occasion was a visit by President Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair to a high school where she was the Administrator-in-Charge.

Julie's husband is a Ph.D. chemist who worked first at the Chicago Medical School and the University of Nebraska Medical School before joining the scientific staff at the National Institutes of Health/National Cancer Institute here in the Washington, DC area in 1971. Much of Larry's career has been devoted to cancer research and cancer-related drug development. Larry retired on October 1st, 2015, after 44 years with the NIH/NCI. Larry is here with Julie today.

Julie and Larry have two children, Steve and Simona, and three grandsons. Their

son Steve, a former Army Ranger, received a dual degree in economics and Japanese from the Wharton School of Business and the University of Pennsylvania. He now owns two businesses. Steve's oldest son has just returned from Israel and will be in charge of the summer tennis program for the Anne Arundel County Recreation Department; his younger son has just completed his second year at Earlham College in Indiana. Daughter Simona is a fine artist and after a career in photography, painting and glasswork now is a businesswoman. Her son has just completed his sophomore year at Springbrook High School in Maryland. As Julie noted to me with pride, "We got really lucky on kids and grandkids."

Julie has worked as a volunteer at the Membership Desk of this museum on Thursdays and later on Mondays where she has shared her story with visitors. Most recently, she has been out on sick leave but hopes to return in July. I think today represents a step forward to doing that.

In addition to Larry, Julie is accompanied today by her daughter Simona.

With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Julie Keefer.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Julie, thank you so much for joining us today and being willing to be our First Person, particularly knowing that you've been ill of late. So we are really glad to have you back. I know you're a little worried about your voice not being strong, but I think with the microphones it will work out just fine.

>> Julie Keefer: Please forgive me if I change octaves. My voice is not under my control. And I apologize. If you cannot hear me, please make sure to raise a hand. Ok? And I have to thank all of you so much for taking your time and coming here today.

>> Bill Benson: Julie, you have so much to share with us in a short period so we'll just jump right in if that's ok.

World War II began with the invasion of Poland by first Germany then Russia in September 1939. You were born in April 1941. When you were born, the city where your family lived was under Soviet occupation. I know you know very little about your family and their lives prior to your birth but to the extent that you can, share with us what you do know about your family prior to your birth.

>> Julie Keefer: First I have to say that what I know are things that my grandfather wrote in his diary. Some things I remember but I remember them with the eyes of a child. And some things I was told.

What I knew about my family beforehand was that my grandfather was an import food and vegetable dealer, middle class. My mother was a Jewish opera singer. My father -- and here is where the translation is interesting -- was either a tinsmith or a plumber. It depends whether you read the Polish or the Russian records. So he was one of the above. My parents were living ok until the Russians came and times became very hard.

>> Bill Benson: Do you know anything about your extended family?

>> Julie Keefer: I know that my grandfather's brothers one way or another died. His wife was killed at Belzac. His parents, extended family, most of them were killed at Belzac.

My uncle, you saw his picture. I do not know his name, my mother's older brother, was in the Polish Army and I guess he was killed there. He was the gentleman on the right, in the uniform. And below him was his wife.

>> Bill Benson: A couple more questions about that time. You had some family at that time in the United States.

>> Julie Keefer: Mm-hmm.

>> Bill Benson: How did they get to be here?
>> Julie Keefer: My grandfather's parents sent the two daughters they had to America because at that time there were pogroms, where Jews were rounded up and often women or killed or raped or both. So to prevent that, my grandfather's father sent his two daughters to America and they settled in Brooklyn.

I also had a great aunt. I don't know how or why she came to America but I remember that she and her twin brother came to America. And my great Aunt Helen, who I adored, was about yay high, with great, big, huge blue eyes and this magnificent face. She had her twin brother who was a farmer and, of course, had five daughters and was so disappointed no sons to help him on his farm.

What I remember about Uncle Charlie was that he drove through the mountains like a fiend. He was just, "Uhhh." He had the biggest hands I had ever seen, huge, huge hands. When I saw “The Potato Eaters” by Van Gogh, I continued to remember my Uncle Charlie.

Anyway, my two grandfather’s sisters -- they lived together in a house they shared. The older one was a widow and her daughter lived in the house also. And the younger one was married and had a daughter who was four years older than I. And Tanta Rosa, the oldest, had a daughter that was eight years older than I.

It was very hard for my aunt. I think my grandfather guilt tripped her and said, oh, you know, you will take my granddaughter. And I don't think she was looking forward to that. And I can't blame her. Here I was this little heathen who grew up in a war, hadn't really seen plumbing before. My English consisted of one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10, period. And if anybody said anything else. And the only school I had gone to was a school in Hebrew. And suddenly she was stuck with me.

She had her own issues. When she first -- she adored her older brother, my grandfather. And he was like her hero. When she first saw me, at a Catholic orphanage in New York when we had just landed in Boston and then by bus we went to New York, I remember her standing at the bottom of the stairs and speaking to one of the nuns in German. She could have spoken English and I would have understood nothing she said but, in fact, she said, when she saw me, "Oh, that can't be Aizik's granddaughter. He's so -- and she's so." And that started off our relationship.
>> Bill Benson: And Julie, I hope we'll get to later how difficult the adjustment was after you arrived here. There were tough times for you in getting here. But going back, you were born in April of 1941 and Nazi Germany turned in June 41. Within days the city of Lwow, where you lived, was occupied by the Nazis. Your family was quickly forced into a ghetto. What did that mean for your family, for all of you including your grandfather, Aizik?
>> Julie Keefer: My grandfather and my father got together and planned a hiding place, which was often called a bunker, a special secret compartment in his barn. And my mother, very pregnant, and I and my father, grandfather and others, were hiding in that secret bunker until my grandfather left to go visit a friend who didn't have any hiding place and then he was picked up. And he was sent to his first labor camp, which was Jaktorow, and that's where he worked in the limestone quarry, which was eight kilometers from the camp itself. He would work in the quarry, taking rocks and he had to bring them back to the camp, enduring beatings all the time.

I visited that place when I went four years ago. It is now appropriately an insane asylum. The building where the commandant lived is the kind of headquarters of it. I was told by a woman we met there -- she said, you know, I was not born yet but I was told that the ground -- this place looked very pastoral, absolutely gorgeous with greenery and mountains

and hills and valleys, just beautiful looking. And on one of these hills is a monument. It is from the Israeli government. It says basically that 20,000 Jews were murdered there. And it's interesting because this woman said that her family members said "I remember the ground moving for three days." What had happened was a huge trench was dug, usually by prisoners themselves, and people were shot and buried but some were buried alive, so kind of moved, the ground moved.

If you read Father Desbois' book, "The Holocaust by Bullets" he described some of that also, in the Ukraine, when he and his colleagues went there to identify Jews who had no known graves and who were just buried here or there, to find what their names were. Father Desbois studied, worked with, Mother Teresa. And he remembered so well Mother Teresa saying everyone deserves a name. So he, too, was bound and determined to go and find the names of those who were not killed in gas chambers or in other ways but who were killed by bullets and buried in unmarked graves.

>> Bill Benson: Julie, your grandfather, as you were describing to us, of course, he was arrested and sent to the first camp and then he would be sent to a second camp, Janowska. Tell us a little bit about what happened to him there.

>> Julie Keefer: Janowska was later known -- began as a labor camp and turned into a killing camp. It was a huge camp. I have some pictures of pieces of it now. When he got captured, first thing that happened was that he was taken to Kleptarow station and people were separated into two groups. Abled-bodied men were put on one side, women weak looking or anyone who had any handicap or children were put into another side.

This gets a little graphic. So if there are young children here, please make sure you talk to them later and process things with them.

Babies were taken by the foot, by their feet, children under 2, and they were thrown against these huge pillars and their skulls were crushed. They were thrown into the trains with the mothers and everyone else who didn't make the count and sent to Belzac, which was a gas camp. And in Belzac -- well, Belzac doesn't exist any longer but at the train station there is a sign saying from this station, Kleptarow, 500,000 Jews were killed, were taken and killed at Belzac camp. And, of course, this was what we had to look forward to. And this is what my grandfather saw. He was taken because he was very strong.

As a matter of fact, the first time I read about Jean Valjean, I kept thinking about my grandfather because Jean Valjean was basically found because he was so strong that he could lift a cart, which he did to save someone's life. And my grandfather could lift a car.

So he was my everything. He was taken because he could be a good worker. He lost 100 pounds. One of his friends -- he watched one of his friends expire in agony because he was hung by his feet until he died.

>> Bill Benson: Your grandfather was whipped viciously in one particular case.

>> Julie Keefer: Yeah, he was. He had said to the commandant that, you know, these beds so-called, wooden slats, would hold eight people at most but not 16. And the commandant was so irritated that a Jew dared to talk this way to him that he had my grandfather receive 100 lashes. And the rule was if you refused to give the 100 lashes to whoever, and it was usually a Jew who was forced to do this, you got 200 and the Jew got killed immediately.

Well, my grandfather was black and blue and that night he was, of course, in agony, but his fellow prisoners had gotten cold, wet material and put it on his back and his body. So the next morning when he got up for what is called [Speaking Non-English Language], which means the head count, the commandant came by and said, "Oh, you dog. You're alive. I

expected you to die. Die, Jew dog, die." And this commandant had a habit of shooting people in the head. He didn't like where your Jewish star was sewed on your jacket or pants, he would shoot I in the head.

So the reason it was called a killing camp is 200,000 Jews were killed from that camp, Janowska.

>> Bill Benson: And your grandfather, despite what he went through, ended up escaping from there. Tell us about his escape.

>> Julie Keefer: He was told the next day -- because he had lost 100 pounds and, of course, a lot of his strength. He was told he would be taken to the back and shot the next day. So he decided to escape.

There is a song by Janice Joplin, “Freedom's just another name for nothing left to lose.” He had nothing left to lose. So where the centuries brought in new prisoners, there were huge gates. And the gates were opened for new prisoners and he ran out and down a hill. We saw where that probably was. Crossed the street and there was this huge like hole or whatever and at the bottom of it a train ran. He was going there. And as he jumped, he was shot in the right hand but he managed to get to the other side just as a train -- a munitions train was coming. So he ran with the train and his life was saved.

But, he had a bleeding hand, he had a thin cotton uniform, the concentration camp uniform, and no shoes because his feet were so big and, of course, all the clothes of all the prisoners were taken and they were given like wooden shoes and nothing would fit him so he was barefoot. And this was in late November. And in Poland it was snowing and terribly cold. So he was running. He wound up in a small woods and wondering how can God do this to the innocent Jewish people.

Then he was desperate and ran to the home of a Polish peasant, Mr. Bereczki. And I'm still trying to go and get him as one of the righteous amongst nations. This is a man, again, poor man who, of course, knew that my grandfather was a Jew, from a concentration camp, because he saw the uniform. Even though my grandfather had ripped off the Jewish star. He bandaged -- well, he put mercurochrome in my grandfather's hand, bandaged it, gave him warm clothing and some food and said, "Look, go sleep in my barn." My grandfather said, "No. I can't do that." Because in Poland if you were a non-Jew who helped a Jew, your family was hung in front of your eyes and they were left on lamp-posts, then you were shot and then the Jew was killed. So my grandfather was very unwilling to do this. And the man said, "Look, I'll leave the barn door open and if the Nazis come, I'll say who knows who goes in my barn? The door was open."

So that's where he spent the night. The following day, Mr. Bereczki gave him a shovel, some food and three breads and salt and took him -- oh, they wrapped his feet in rags because, of course, nobody had shoes to fit him. Mr. Bereczki took him to the forest which was about six kilometers away and told him to hide himself there. And the shovel was to dig a ditch for himself so that he could hide from the elements but also from the Nazis because it was a very vast woods. So my grandfather did that.

Meanwhile, my father, my mother, and my baby sister was born while they were in hiding.

>> Bill Benson: In the ghetto.

>> Julie Keefer: In that bunker in the ghetto. And I often think how could my mother do it. How could she give birth to a live child and stay alive herself in a situation where there was no medicine, no food, there were dead bodies all over the place? How could she cope? But

apparently she did because my baby sister was born.

Then my grandfather was hiding in the woods. One day he heard some men.

>> Bill Benson: In the meantime, you're still all hidden.

>> Julie Keefer: We're all still hidden. That's right. Thank you. Right.

My grandfather is in this small tunnel. Other Jews come. And one of them has a gun. So my grandfather had been a soldier in World War I, so he became head. The tunnel got more and more expanded by more and more people coming from small towns near Lwow, all around, until there was 30-some Jews hiding in this tunnel.

>> Bill Benson: Which he had been enlarging.

>> Julie Keefer: All the men were. And the men would go out at night and shoot the tires of Nazi munitions trucks and grab guns and ammo and grenades. They would also go to the Ukrainian collaborator huts and grab cheese, canned goods, whatever they could, and water, and whatever they could grab to bring back to the people in the tunnel.

One day as my grandfather went to Mr. Bereczki's house again, he found out that the Nazis were going to burn the ghetto. Of course, we were still hiding there. So he took a Nazi command car, a Nazi uniform --

>> Bill Benson: That they had stolen.

>> Julie Keefer: That they had stolen. Thank you. Right, Bill. And decided to go to the ghetto to get us out. And he went at night. He asked the other men to stay in the forest a little bit far away and he would go to the ghetto himself. Because he knew exactly where we were.

So he went in. He took me and my father took my baby sister and my mother and we all got somehow to the command car. We were supposed to go to Mr. Bereczki's, my grandfather and he had talked about how they were going to hide my mother, my baby sister, Tola, and me. I was almost 3. My baby sister was 5 months.

What I remember about that time is a couple of things. I remember that tunnel. I remember it so clearly. And sometime if we have time I'll describe it you. But I don't remember any people in it. I remember my grandfather, that's all.

>> Bill Benson: And yet 30-plus people were there.

>> Julie Keefer: Were there. Uh-huh. The men were going out often to get supplies and to do whatever they could.

>> Bill Benson: You ended up not staying with Mr. Bereczki though. And why was that?

>> Julie Keefer: Because my mother said, look, I've lost my mother, I've lost so much, I'm not going to lose my husband and you, father, I'm not going to be separated. If I die, I want to die with my family. What's left of it. So she got her way. My baby sister and I were taken to the tunnel.

Now, the tunnel, we all got lice. It was cold and damp and full of all kinds of insects. We couldn't really bathe. It was too cold to bathe in cold water. And the other thing was -- well, we tried to wash but we had to use the water we got for drinking. We could not cook or make fires because the Nazis would see the smoke. So it was a tough place to be.

>> Bill Benson: Especially for little kids.

>> Julie Keefer: Especially for little kids. Now, I have to describe it to you, if you don't mind. Is that ok? Ok.

This is a way -- remember, I was almost 3 at this point. So the memory I have is of a very tall ladder, a wooden ladder going down, which probably was no more than six feet. And I remember these walls that were wet clay or mud. They were damp. I remember feeling my way. There was one kind of long room. And everything, I remember that clay, that cold, damp

clay. And at the end of that room was a round, wooden, splintery table and on it squatted a fat candle. And that was the source of light. And I remember touching my way around and feeling all of that. And then there was like an arch way to the side. And in that archway was another room much smaller than this one. But what I remember about it was it was dark and I remember touching touching or trying to touch something. And it was the first time my grandfather raised his voice to me. He raised his hand. "Don't touch!" He was about to smack my hand.

Now, my grandfather was my darling and I was his and he never raised his voice much less his hand to me. So I was shocked. And can you guess why he raised his voice? Anybody?

>> [Inaudible]

>> Bill Benson: Knock over the candle?

>> Julie Keefer: That's a good point. But the candle was still in the other room. This was in a separate room on the side.

>> Bill Benson: Weapons?

>> Julie Keefer: Exactly. It was guns and ammunition and grenades. And if I had touched that, something might have gone off. So that's why.

>> Bill Benson: I know you have so much more to share with us and our time is getting a little bit on the short side. You did not stay in the bunker terribly long before your grandfather had to make the decision for you not to stay there. Tell us about the events from there for you.

>> Julie Keefer: Because we cried -- I could be stopped but how do you stop a 6-month-old, a 5-month-old baby? So one day my mother put her hand over Tola's mouth and almost suffocated her. My grandfather said, “Sala, stop, you'll smother the baby.” So he decided he would get us out of there because we were endangering not only our family but everybody else. And grandpa was the leader and he couldn't endanger the lives of 30-some people for his grandchildren.

So he dressed as a Polish peasant, with Mr. Bereczki's help. He had one of these jackets that he pulled up the collar very high. He borrowed a cart from Mr. Bereczki. It was not uncommon to go to the central market of Lwow. He did that. And in the central market he was looking for a doctor who ran a Catholic orphanage and could not find him. He describes how desperate he was. He couldn't find him. And he didn't know what to do. So what he did was he was thinking of just leaving us because we were little and cute and he thought, well, someone would take us and save our lives. And if he lived through the war, he would come and get us after the war was over.

Just at that point he ran into a woman who had been a neighbor of his, a Polish Catholic woman. Her name is on the wall of the righteous amongst nations, Lucia Nowicka. She is the one who saved our lives. She became my pretend aunt. Told us pretend aunt. Supposedly Tola and I were her sister's children and her sister was from the small town nearby and her sister had been killed. There was a lot of fighting at that point between Pols and Ukrainians. And they were Polish and they were supposedly killed by Ukrainians.

So he said, “Lucia, can you take the babies and save their lives?” And she said, “But Aizik, I no longer have my own home. I live as a live-in housekeeper for a retired engineer and his wife in the country. So I'd have to ask Mrs. Swierczynski if I could take the children.” So she did, and could she bring her nieces, her sister died and she had to take care of them. And Mrs. Swierczynski said sure, why not. So we came there as her nieces.

My grandfather, as Bill mentioned to you, took her husband's, dead husband's,

papers and became instead of Aizik Eisen he became Stanislaus Nowicka, 6'2", Hazel-colored eyes, about 220 or so pounds, so he could pass.

At that point -- Lucia lived as this housekeeper who took care of the cooking, the cleaning, the skinny horse, the skinnier cow. And she was there and my grandfather was in the area working at various farms, trying to get a potato here, a chicken there, anything to bring back and help.

>> Bill Benson: Had he gone back to the bunker yet?

>> Julie Keefer: Not yet. He had not gone back to the bunker yet.

Then someone on the street, a woman down the street, said that Lucia Nowicka, housekeeper for the Swierczynskis, was hiding Jewish children. Now, the Gestapo came to question her and took her for questioning, which meant she was imprisoned and tortured. When my grandfather came back to the house, he couldn't find Lucia. Mrs. Swierczynski was kind of beside herself. So he said, “What's going on?” Well, Mrs. Swierczynski said that the Gestapo took her housekeeper and she doesn't know why. So grandpa said, you know, Mrs. Swierczynski, you're a friend of the wife of the Nazi governor of Lwow. Now, the Nazi governor of Lwow lived in the house next to the Swierczynskis. So there were soldiers all around. So my grandfather said, Well, can you talk to the governor's wife and find out what's going on and get Lucia back?

While she was gone -- by the way, Mrs. Swierczynski could not cope with a little tiny baby. She was old. And she had a house to take care of and all of this cooking to do and these animals. So she went to the governor's wife and said, look, they took Lucia and I don't know why and I really don't know what to do without her because I can't do all of this.

Meanwhile, before this happened, my grandfather decided to save Tola's life by taking her, at 6 months old, to a Catholic orphanage run by a professor of pediatrics at the university and also a pediatrician who ran this children's home. He changed her name from Tola Weinstock, Jewish child, to Antonina Nowicka, Catholic child, 6 months old, blondish hair, blue eyes, and paid three months in advance and thought, well, at least one of us will survive the war.

He came back. And then he talked with Mrs. Swierczynski about approaching the governor's wife to get Lucia back because he was terrified that the Gestapo was going to kill her or torture her so badly that she would tell that we were all Jewish and that the people in the woods were Jewish as well. Well, the commandant heard. He took his car, whatever, and went to Gestapo quarters and told the Gestapo to get Lucia and bring her right down. So Lucia was told by the Gestapo to clean up and to not talk about her experiences ever to anyone. And she came back to the Swierczynski's home to resume her duties. As I say, she had been tortured. So she was a little bit high strung after this and had a hard time.

>> Bill Benson: But she had stuck to the story that you were her nieces?

>> Julie Keefer: She absolutely, and didn't tell anything about anything. And my grandfather felt, well, ok, one child was safe at the children's home, I was safe where I was, now he had to go to the woods and check on how everybody was doing in the woods.

It was now April, right around my birthday. It was 1944. He went to the woods. And at first he thought something's funny. This tunnel has been disturbed. Then he found the bodies. He thought maybe it was our own grenades or whatever. Then he and one other man who had gone to work with the resistance found that all the bodies had bullet holes. So he and this other man said a prayer for the dead and buried all 30-some people in that same tunnel in the Borszczowice woods. And there my parents lie in an unmarked grave somewhere in the

Borszczowice Forest.

When we went back, my husband and I, in 2013, we were going through the Borszczowice Forest and trying to find these huge depressions. We found lots of depressions but --

>> Bill Benson: No way to know.

>> Julie Keefer: No way to know. Right, no way to know.

>> Bill Benson: So your grandfather's there. He's just buried his daughter and son-in-law and your parents and many others, and now he makes his way back to Lucia and the Swierczynskis. What happened then?

>> Julie Keefer: Then he was now living there with Lucia.

>> Bill Benson: As her husband.

>> Julie Keefer: As her husband. And pretty soon, two months later, the Russians came and liberated us and the war was over for us. Then, we started kind of -- well, he kept -- he started looking for my sister. The children's home, the roof had been bombed, and she had been moved to a different town in Poland. He went there and looked for her. Nothing. So at that point he decided to try other places. He heard that the children, 80 of them, were broken into two groups, 40 went to Western Europe somewhere and 40 were taken to Hungary. Now, at that time you could not get into Hungary at all. It was tight with the Russians so couldn't get in there at all. He went everywhere, to Germany to France, to Austria, to you name it, could not find any trace of these 40 children. And we've been looking ever since.

Oh, then we were living in a DP camp, our third one now.

>> Bill Benson: A displaced persons camp.

>> Julie Keefer: Or delayed pilgrims.

>> [Laughter]

>> Julie Keefer: So we were, indeed, delayed. Ok? So there we were, in our third one which was the [Indiscernible] camp, very close to Austria. This camp was the largest of the three in Austria and the most primitive. It was meant to be very temporary. So people lived in shacks and old-fashioned Army barracks which were broken into rooms. Each family got one room. There was no indoor plumbing. There was no heat. There was no, of course, electricity. There was no water. You had to get your water from an outside spigot and the privies were all in a row on one side of the camp. It was not a great place to be.

My grandfather wanted us to go to Israel but -- at that time it was Palestine. But Palestine was not taking any more old people and orphaned children because it was in a state of war itself. So he tried for America but you could not get visas to America at all, except if you were an orphan and you were born between certain years, you could come to America. Well, I qualified. I was 7 years old. Grandpa sent me to America so I could have a better life. I could have food and safety and shelter and disease free.

>> Bill Benson: So you traveled here by yourself without any family members.

>> Julie Keefer: I traveled with a group of orphan girls. I was the youngest by five years. Grandpa talked to a 13-year-old girl and asked her to be in charge of me; that I was little and he was going to be so sad. I was all he had left. Would she look after me?

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember anything about how you felt at that time?

>> Julie Keefer: Yes. I remember that very clearly. Before we came to America we had to have all kinds of shots and immunizations, and so we were in a series of different orphanages. The first one, I remember one day walking with my grandfather. At this point he had married the woman who saved our lives and she became my grandmother. And we were all walking. It was

beautiful, beautiful spring day. And I remember flowers all around. I remember we were walking in a field. We saw what looked like kind of wire, like a cage. And there were children there. They were sticking their noses in the wire things. I remember feeling just awful because they all looked so sad. So I remember taking Dziadzia's hand and saying, “You won't put me there, will you?” And he said, “No, I won't.” I said, “Promise.” He said, “Ok, I promise.” A week later we were at the entrance of this home and I was put into it.

And I felt totally betrayed. I felt terribly lonely and not wanted. I remember I told you that grandma's mind was affected when she was tortured and she couldn't cope with the fact that she was losing me. So I remember her bending down and saying to me, whispering, "See how terrible you are? Even your dziadzia does not like you." And so I was sad. We went from one orphanage to another. I stopped eating. I was just kind of wasting away, I guess, because one of the nuns said to another one, "We better call the grandfather. She's not going to live." So they called. He and babciu came. And dziadzia gave me my first real toy, a China doll with eyes that opened and closed. And he gave a dozen oranges to the nuns and sum to this girl who he wanted to watch me.

Now, oranges were priceless at that time. Nobody had oranges. He kissed me. I remember I got on the ship. The ship was an old Naval vessel converted to take 800-plus passengers to Boston, America. I thought -- I was very lonely. We girls slept on what they called hammocks. And there were four of them. And I slept on the bottom one because I was obviously the shortest. But what I remember is something moving all the time. Terribly seasick. I remember a terrible, terrible tooth ache. Because in DP camp anything American was wonderful. So what did we get? Coca-Cola. What did we live on? Coca-Cola. Well, it did a number on my teeth, I guess. So I had this massive, massive tooth ache. My friend talked to one of the nuns and the nuns put oil of cloves on it. To this day when I smell oil of cloves, I remember that feeling on that ship. But it took eight agonizing days to go from Bremen to at that point Boston.

Just as an aside, in fourth grade, in America, we were studying geography and our teacher was pointing out this is the distance between this and this. Well, the distance between Bremen and Boston was this big. Ok? And it took eight days. So I decided geography lied.

>> Bill Benson: We're at the end of our time. You have to close our program. Obviously we could spend a great deal more time with Julie just hearing about her transition, ending up in Cleveland in an orphanage for a number of years before being adopted when you were 16, I believe.

>> Julie Keefer: I was 16.

>> Bill Benson: And then later, of course, your grandfather and Lucia would come to the United States. I wish we had time to hear that.

The one last thing I would like you to share with us is you lost your parents so young, in a terrible way. You do not remember them but you told me that there is a song that for you evokes the memory of your mom.

>> Julie Keefer: As I mentioned to you, my mother was a Jewish opera singer. She had a gorgeous voice. What I remember about my mother, yes, that song [Indiscernible], if I'm saying it correctly. It's a Yiddish lullaby and very, very beautiful. And I remember that she was soft and cuddly and she smelled milky. That's all I remember about her. And I guess she must have smelled milky because she was nursing my baby sister. And she was soft and cuddly and had this gorgeous voice, in contrast to Lucia.

Lucia I have to describe as a woman who could swear in 30 different languages.

>> Bill Benson: Could not sing lullabies?
>> Julie Keefer: I asked her to sing a lullaby once and I got this croaking sound of a bar song. I said, well, never mind.
>> [Laughter]
>> Julie Keefer: And that's when I noticed that there was a difference. Then she was also very, very thin and bony and my mother was nice and soft. One day she had me in her arms and was taking me on a bus, saying she was my mother. And I said, "You're not my mother!"
>> Bill Benson: Julie's going to close our program in just a couple of moments. It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person has the last word, so Julie will close the program. Before she does -- first, we didn't have a chance for you to ask questions of Julie but when we're done when Julie finishes in a moment, she will remain on the stage. So, please, absolutely feel free to come up on stage afterwards. Just say hi to her, give her a hug, get your photo taken or ask her the questions you want to ask her. We urge you to do that if you want to do that. We'll just have you come up on stage if you don't mind.

I thank you for being here. We have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. We hope you can come back sometime. If not, in future years. Just look on the museum's website. You will see the schedule for us. We run between March and August of each year.
>> Bill Benson: It's our tradition that our First Person has the last word. So, Julie?
>> Julie Keefer: Well, I feel very, very fortunate. I have been so lucky in my life. I have had help when I thought I would never have help, nor did I want it at times. But I was so fortunate to meet people and have them in my life who made life worthwhile and living.

My work in the Holocaust Museum is so great because I get to meet all of these wonderful young people who are so super. They're smart. They care. They're dedicated to humanity and helping others. I think, wow, are we ever fortunate to have such wonderful, fabulous young people. And I look at my three grandsons and they fit the bill, too. So I feel extremely fortunate that I get to have contact with these wonderful young people, including [Indiscernible] here. We worked on a project together and he's fabulous.

Thank you all very, very much.
>> [Applause]