

## *Why the Stories Are So Important*

“To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.” This is a quote from Elie Wiesel, one of the most famous survivors from the worst genocide the world has ever seen; the Holocaust. One of the central stages of genocide is dehumanization - the deliberate stripping away of identity and individuality. During the Holocaust, Jewish people were reduced to numbers and forced to wear identifying stars, their names, homes, and histories erased in the eyes of their oppressors; but their stories are about more than that. When we talk about the Holocaust without the real stories, we in some way are dehumanizing all the people who went through it, a second time.

To fully understand the statistics we need context. Numbers mean nothing until you give them meaning. Six million is not simply a number- it represents six million individual stories. One of those stories belongs to a survivor named Estelle Laughlin. Estelle died on August 27th 2024, but her experiences still bring a voice of those who can't speak up. To learn how Estelle's life was affected we need to first understand her life before. Estelle was born in 1929, in Warsaw Poland, to her mother Michla and her father Samek. She also had a sister named Freda who was a little over a year older than her. Estelle's mother stayed home and her father worked at a jewelry store. They were a middle class family and lived a very peaceful life. “Warsaw shines in my selective memory and golden radiance of lilac trees against open blue skies, rich sounds of good neighbors, kindness, and faith and love. It was a rich life.” (*Estelle Laughlin First Person Interview- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*). This was until 1939 when the Nazis invaded Poland. The Nazis began creating ghettos in occupied cities across Poland. These ghettos were just enclosed sections of cities, and served as a way to separate Jews from the rest of the population. Estelle and her family, along with 400,000 other Jews, were forced from their homes into the Warsaw Ghetto, which was only 1.3 square miles. Jewish residents were required to wear the Star of David, marking them as targets for discrimination and violence. This symbol did more than identify them—it stripped them of their individuality and reinforced Nazi propaganda that portrayed them as less than human. All of the Jewish children who attended public school were no longer allowed to keep continuing their education. Food in the ghetto was very sparse and not enough to sustain life. Estelle's family stayed alive solely because Samek was getting food from the black market to support his family. In the matter of days her whole life was flipped upside and her childhood was taken from her. “Our once peaceful streets were patrolled by foreign soldiers. They walked into our homes. They said the Jewish people, you know—in order to be mean to people, in order to put people down, you have to demonize them. And they said the Jewish people are greedy and Jewish people are all the bad things in spite of the fact that they walked into our homes like common thieves or stopped us in streets and helped themselves to whatever they wanted to”. (*Estelle Laughlin First Person Interview- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*)

After you understand someone's life before the Holocaust, hearing the terrible things that same person endured during it becomes more difficult. But this is good, when we are talking about the Holocaust we should be uncomfortable. These uncomfortable conversations are what properly form our opinions. “Studying this history can prompt discussion of the societal contexts that enable exclusionary policies to divide communities and promote environments that make

genocide possible.” (*Unesco - The Importance of Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust*) Three years after the original invasion in 1942, there was a period known as the Grossaktion Warsaw. During this time Nazis were sending huge masses of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto, on trains to the Treblinka killing center. Around 265,000 people were sent to the center, but not Estelle’s family. During this time Estelle and her family hid in the basement of one of the houses within the Ghetto, to avoid being deported to Treblinka. After this mass deportation ended, there were still tens of thousands of Jews left in the Warsaw ghetto. At this time Estelle along with her mother and sister, had to work in a factory, mending German uniforms. Then a year later in 1943, the Warsaw ghetto uprising began. The many resistance groups in the ghetto started putting posters up. Many of which read “During the past six months, we have been living in constant, mortal fear, never knowing what the coming day would bring. News has reached us from all sides, about the extermination of Jews in the General Gouvernement in Germany and in the occupied countries. JEWISH MASSES! The hour is drawing near. You must be prepared to offer resistance and not let yourselves be slaughtered like sheep. No Jew must enter a boxcar. People unable to resist actively, should offer passive resistance, that means, hide themselves.”(*National WW2 Museum; New Orleans*). Even with all the efforts of thousands of Jews during this uprising, in April the house where Estelle’s family was hiding was bombed, because of this Estelle alongside her mother, father and sister were sent to Majdanek. Majdanek was one of the main Nazi concentration camps, and was located near the city of Lubin. But it didn't end there, once they reached the camp Estelle, Freda, and Micla were all chosen for forced labor. This left Samek, he was immediately sent to be killed and died in a gas chamber. This would have eventually been the fate for the rest of their family if it weren't for their resistance and love for one another. The other three ladies would have been next to be sent to the crematorium but they had made a pact that if one of them died they all died. So when Freda's names appeared on a list, the others assumed she was getting sent to die. Without even thinking Estelle and Micla switched with other women on the list to go with her. This ended up getting them all sent to Czestochowa, another concentration camp in Poland. They worked there for several months until January of 1945, when they were liberated by Soviet Forces.

After surviving this kind of genocide, how does one move on with their life? Estelle stayed in Poland for a few months with her sister and mother. Very soon after they moved away from Poland and all the antisemitic violence, to a now ally occupied Germany. A few years later they moved to New York City where they began rebuilding their lives and Estelle became a volunteer at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. But life doesn't go back to normal, for many survivors they can't even remember what normal was like before the cataclysm that was the Holocaust. You must rebuild your life from the ground up, and your experiences will come with you for all of it. “Sixty-four years have passed since my liberation from the concentration camp. I no longer can remember where I last put my glasses, yet I remember—clear as light—scenes that turned my sunny childhood into an inferno and killed nearly everyone I loved. I ask myself, How did my mother, my sister, and I survive? How did we survive whole, with love, compassion and joy for life? Without this human core, survival would have little meaning”. (*Estelle Laughlin, Transcending the Darkness: A Girl's Journey out of the Holocaust*)

Where does all of this leave us? Learning about the stories of survivors like Estelle, in this depth can change our future. It gives perspective and context; but it really reminds me of the word *sonder*. *Sonder* was popularized by the project, *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* where it is

described as “*The realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own - full of ambitions, routines, relationships, worries, and memories you’ll never know about.*” Learning about Estelle’s story can hopefully help you bring you to this realization, the realization that her life was just as deep and complex as yours or mine. As well, through learning about others we can learn a lot about ourselves. We can all hope that we never have to experience genocide like this in our lifetime, but hatred and malice still exist everywhere. With the lessons we learn through the stories of survivors we gain so many more tools to help abolish this hate, and help cultivate love and acceptance. Now more than ever remembering history and all the emotions that come with it is how we can ensure our future children don’t have to live in a world filled with fear and violence.

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