

Good afternoon and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson and I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. This is our third season of First Person. And today's first person is Mrs. Flora Singer, whom we shall meet shortly. First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who are sharing with the audience here in the museum their own personal accounts of their experience during the Holocaust and World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here in the museum.

And we will have a new First Person program each Wednesday until August 28. If you go to the museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- you will find a list of those who will be the First Person guests in the coming weeks. This 2002 season of First Person is made possible by a generous gift from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation, to whom we are enormously grateful for making this season possible.

I'd like to introduce several individuals who make this program work each week. I'd like to introduce Andrea Lewis from the public education department. Andrea, if you can, wave back there. And then immediately to Andrea's left, you have Dora Jacobson and then Harold down here on the left side. To the right side of those of you who are seated, I mentioned these folks not only because they are important to the program each week and making it work smoothly, but also because we would like to invite you to share with us afterwards any comments, thoughts that you might have about this program, anything you'd like to share with us about the program. Please, corner any one of us afterwards and do that.

We will listen to Flora Singer as she shares her first-person account, her experience through the Holocaust for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Mrs. Singer a few questions. Before you are introduced to her, let me make two requests of you, if I might. First, we ask you to stay in your seats throughout our program. That way, we minimize any disruptions to Mrs. Singer as she speaks.

And secondly, during our question and answer period, please, make your questions brief. And then I will repeat the question before Mrs. Singer responds to it. And I'd also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition this afternoon, please know they're good for the entire afternoon. So you don't need to feel compelled to jump up because you might miss the exhibition. You'll be just fine.

And with that, I would like to welcome First Person's guest, Flora Singer. As you will hear from Flora today, she was not yet 10 when Germany invaded her country of Belgium. She was living with her mother and two younger sisters. Her father had left for the United States two years earlier in 1938, but had not been able to get his family out of Belgium and to the United States.

Flora's mother quickly determined that she must take her daughters and flee. And she did just that. First, they fled to France, but were soon forced back to Belgium. From there, they went into hiding in various places, including being hidden by Catholic nuns at several convents, before finally being liberated by Allied forces in late 1944. We prepared a brief slide presentation to help with the introduction of Flora Singer.

We have here a photograph of Flora with her mother and two sisters. That was taken right before everything really went very bad for the family. And Flora, we'll talk about this. And we'll hear about it. And here, we have her mother, Fani, in the middle. Flora's on the right-hand side-- or actually, I guess-- yeah, your right-hand side, and then her two sisters, Betty and Charlotte.

This is a map of Europe showing Germany and also Belgium, where the arrow is pointing to. This is a larger map of Belgium with an arrow that points to the city of Antwerp, which was the home of Flora Singer and her family. Flora's family had emigrated to Belgium in the late 1920s to escape antisemitism. There, Flora's father owned a shop, where he made custom furniture.

After Germany invaded Belgium in 1940, Jewish people lost many civil liberties. The photograph shows Belgians examining a sign that reads, it is absolutely not permitted for Jews to enter the hotel Divantis. In early 1942, Flora and her family were forced to wear yellow stars, just like this one.

When Flora and her family fled to Brussels, Flora was hidden in convents in Belgium and was spared deportation because of the efforts of resistance fighter Georges Ranson, Father Bruno Reynders, and others. This photograph shows Father Bruno, a Benedictine monk, with five Jewish children he is sheltering. And this final photograph is of Flora on the lower left-hand side with her relatives, taken in 1938. This is an especially significant photo, one I hope that we will be able to talk about today.

In 1946, Flora came to the United States. Today, Flora and her husband, Jack, who is with us right in the front row-- Jack, if you could wave your hand-- live here in the Washington, DC area. Flora has been an educator for most of her adult life, having earned a master's degree in French literature from the University of Maryland and having taught at the University of Maryland.

While she is retired from teaching in the Montgomery County Public School system, she continues to be an educator, in addition to being a frequent speaker about the Holocaust. She helped create an accredited graduate program on the Holocaust for educators a number of years ago and continues to teach the course to this day. She's very active in the survivor community. And she and Jack volunteer here at the museum. They have a son, and a daughter, and four grandchildren. We are about to learn a great deal more from Flora about her experience during the Holocaust. With that, I would like to ask you to join me in welcoming our first person, Mrs. Flora Singer. Flora, can you join us?

Having Flora with me today in First Person seems especially significant. Flora was the scheduled guest for First Person this past September 12. And as you can imagine, the museum was closed on that date. And this is our first opportunity to have Flora come back and join us. And so Flora, thank you so much for agreeing again on a-- fortunately, a very different day today than the last time you were to be here. Pleasure to have you. And so thanks for being our first person guest.

You're welcome.

Flora, your parents and other family members had left Romania for Belgium because of its reputation for tolerance. You spent most of your first nearly 10 years living in Antwerp, Belgium before the Nazis occupied Belgium. Please, tell us a bit about your life, your family, your community in those years before--

Before the war.

--before the war.

We were a happy family. Antwerp had a fairly large Jewish population, and which got along beautifully with the non-Jewish population. And it never occurred to us that there was something wrong with being Jewish. We attended public school. We came home when the Sabbath arrived. Friday night, my mom lit candles. We said the prayers. We brought the Sabbath in.

On Saturday morning, we went to synagogue. And sometimes, we children snuck out of synagogue to play, and no one saw us. Of course, we had to go back in, and you know how children are. Anyway, and life just went on.

And then after Dad had left, I couldn't understand why he left because I was only eight years-- I wasn't quite eight when he left because he left early in 1938. And when I asked my mother, she sort of brushed it off. But then later, in 1938, many people came to our city from Austria and from Germany.

And many of the Jewish people in our neighborhood lodged some of those people. And we had four refugees living with us. And my sisters and I had to double up-- triple up, actually, into one bed so that we could get the other beds sort of refugees. And I remember asking my mother, Mommy, what's a refugee? I didn't know what the word meant. And she said, a refugee is someone who runs away from their country because bad people want to hurt them. And I still couldn't understand. But I accepted it.

And then I heard them talking. And some of the things I heard were so horrible, I couldn't believe them. And I said to Mommy, Mommy, are those bad people going to come here and hurt us? So she said, oh, don't worry, old people

exaggerate. I found out those people were in their 40s. But to us, they were old. And then just time just went on.

Some of these were people that had fled Germany following Kristallnacht.

Following Kristallnacht, exactly, Night of Broken Glass.

So you and other people in your community were taking them into your home.

Exactly.

Tell us how old your sisters were at that time.

At that time, in '38, one of my sisters was five. And the other one was two.

Your father, of course, as you said, was in the United States. And he had been trying to get you-- bring his family over the US.

Yes. It was very difficult for people to immigrate into the United States at that time, particularly if you originated from Eastern countries, Eastern European countries.

Were you able to hear from him? Do you recall if you could heard from your father regularly?

We did at first. We did hear from him. And he even sent a little money. And then suddenly, everything stopped-- no mail, no money.

Tell us about that, when everything stopped.

Well, when everything stopped-- actually, I think it was late 1939 when we stopped getting mail.

Soon after Germany had invaded Poland.

Right. And then things even changed in Antwerp. There were leaflets put into people's mailboxes. Jews, get out, you don't belong here, or things like that, but no violence, no violence at all. And then in 1939, Mom went to harbor with a friend and came home very agitated. She says, why won't they let the people off the ship? Why won't they let them? And she was just going on. I said, Mommy, what's going on, what's happening? And she didn't answer me, says, why won't they let the people off the ship? And I never got an answer to my question. I didn't find out until after the war that the ship she was talking about was the St. Louis.

Or you might just-- some of these folks here--

For those of you who might know.

--may not the St. Louis. You might just say just a quick word about the St. Louis. The St. Louis was a ship with about 900 refugees who had left Hamburg, Germany to try to make it to Cuba. There was an arrangement. And visas were procured for the people to go to Cuba and then disembark there. When they got to Cuba, they were not allowed to disembark. After negotiations and everything, the ship came to the United States and was not allowed to-- people weren't allowed to disembark. So the ship had to turn back to Europe.

And that was the ship your mother saw in the harbor.

That was the ship my mother saw at the harbor. So a few months later, 1940, Germany invades Belgium.

I'll never forget that day, May the 10th. It was so sudden. You call it the Blitzkrieg, meaning the war of lightning because Belgium was neutral, meaning it wasn't participating in any wars or anything. But suddenly, German tanks

rolled into Belgium. I want to make something clear though, Bill, if it's OK with you.

Sure.

I'm very careful about using German and Nazis separately, especially when I talk to young people, because none of us choose to be born where we're born, nor do we choose our parents. We just find out who they are. Someone who is born of German parents isn't necessarily a Nazi. That's something that you freely accept to be, like other groups-- the Ku Klux Klan, Alliance.

OK. So as you said, you'll never forget this day.

Never.

Tell us where you were on that day.

Yeah. On that day, I had just walked home from school. And I walked into our street. As a matter of fact, they released us early. And I had no idea why. And when I walked into our street, it was chaotic. There were horse wagons-- in those days, there were very few cars yet-- bicycles, one or two cars. And people were loading these vehicles. And people were leaving. And nobody was really talking, it was just rushing around. And I couldn't believe what was going on.

And when I finally got home, and I said, Mommy, what's happening, says, oh, we have to leave. Everybody is leaving. The Germans are coming. And it's going to be very cruel. And they're going to hurt everybody, especially if you're Jewish. And it was just-- so we left. Somebody offered us a seat. And I don't know if you know what a tumble seat is. It's sort of where the trunk is on a car, that seat that opens up backwards. But somebody said, you can go. And we shortly ran out of gasoline, though. And there was no way to replenish that.

Was this all four of you?

Yes, all-- no, actually, it was just three of us. My poor sister and I, we were three, the two oldest-- and I was the oldest-- and my second sister, we were in a fresh air camp at that particular week.

What's a fresh air camp?

Fresh air camp-- in Belgium, children, especially city children, were offered a week, two weeks, sometimes a month at camps at the beach or in areas with a lot of trees in the countryside. And so we were away, two of us. And that particular morning, I remember, we woke up and we went to breakfast. And while I was sitting at the table, there was a little radio on the shelf. And there were-- music was playing. And then suddenly-- excuse me. And suddenly, the radio stopped with silence for a moment. And then a voice came over the radio-- the German Army just invaded Belgium.

Hansel didn't even wait any longer. They immediately had us go up to the dormitory, pack our bags. They put us on a bus, they brought us back to Antwerp. When we got back to Antwerp, my mother was waiting for me. Although it was unexpectedly, she didn't really know I was being brought back, because in those days, there were no telephones in homes and things like that. So she says, oh, good, we can go because we're offered a seat by so-and-so. I can't recall his name right now.

In the trundle seat of the car.

In that trundle seat. He says, but we have to wait for Charlotte. The man and his family, they wanted to leave. They were afraid. And he said, look, I'm going to leave. I said, wait just a little longer. Flora was brought back, Charlotte will be brought back shortly. So I waited and waited. Finally, they decided to leave. So Mom talked to another neighbor who had decided she wasn't running anywheres because it's not necessary, people are exaggerating things.

So she said to her, take my Charlotte in. I'll be back for her. And we did take the seat. And we started out towards France, like most refugees were heading in that direction. For the rest of her life-- Mom did survive the Holocaust, she

was the only one of six sisters who did. The entire family was killed in Auschwitz. And the rest of her life, she felt very guilty about even having done that. We ended up in northern France.

Before you get to northern France, you had mentioned earlier that you ran out of gas. So from that point, how did you get to France?

It's interesting you ask that question. You walk, it's like we slept in the fields. Occasionally, we would sleep in a barn. Occasionally, there was a Red Cross car with the Red Cross people gave you a little milk, a little food.

A mother with two young girls in tow.

Right. It's just like everybody else. The roads were packed with refugees.

I was struck one other time you were here with us the year before last, you said that the images on TV of the refugees in Kosovo just brought back for you.

It certainly does. It's almost like a flashpoint back into--

For many people in the audience, that might be an image that they can relate.

Right. Because the roads were literally packed with people. People were laying on the roads, on the side of the roads, and broken-down cars-- not so much that the cars were broken down, but people ran out of petrol. And there wasn't anywhere to get it. And some people either fainted. Or some might have even died from sunstroke. I don't know. But it was horrible.

Drive as far as you can go on the tank of gas.

And then the rest on foot, right.

So you get to France.

So we get the France. We did manage to get. We got to a city. At first, we didn't know what the city was, but it was Calais, which is a city in northern France. And actually, it's a harbor, which literally sits on the channel across from England. And sirens sounded. We ran into a bomb shelter. And when the sirens sounded the clear, Mom told me to stay in the bomb shelter with my younger sister because she had the measles. And we went with her. She survived the measles, it's amazing-- no doctor, no medicine, or anything.

On that journey, she had the measles?

On the journey. Well, she had them before we left.

Before you left.

But that didn't stop us.

Right.

And so I stayed in the shelter with her when the all-clear sounded. And Mom went to find lodgings. She got lost and forgot where we were. Because we didn't look where the sirens are. We just ran in. It was a city we didn't know. And I was very obedient-- not always-- but I just stayed there with my sister. And she was crying. She was thirsty. And I finally, I felt, no, I have to go out and--

And everybody else has left the shelter.

--find Mom. Because everybody had left them when the all-clear sounded. And we were the only two. And it was fairly dark. And I was really frightened.

Underground.

Right. And so I started going out and it was pitch dark because everybody had had blackout shade. Streetlights weren't on because of wartime. And so I walked the streets, yelling, mama, mama. And finally, finally, I heard a voice, calling, Florka-- the diminutive of Flora. And we were reunited. So in a way, in retrospect, it was the best thing I did, disobeying my mother and leaving the shelter.

So she hadn't been able to find any lodgings. So we walked. And we ended up at the harbor in Calais. And we sat down. And we had one suitcase. We started out with three suitcases. And we ended up leaving a second one somewhere-- the first one, the second one. And we went down to one suitcase at this point. So we sat down at the harbor.

And Mom saw a Red Cross ship. So she decided to walk over and see if she can get us passage on the ship. They were bringing in wounded people, army people, and all kinds of people on the ship. And so she went over to someone she saw there. And she asked me if they would take us to England. Her idea was, well, if we can get to England, we can find my father in America, and make it over there, and then somehow, Charlotte again, and all of us ending up here.

So they told us to wait. And if they had room, they would take us. So we waited and we waited. And then finally, they told us, there's no room on the ship and that they would leave without us. We're sorry. So we started to walk away.

But then someone was yelling, oh, oh, there's a ship. There's a boat. You want to come? We're going to England. We're going to England. And it was a fishing vessel. So everybody got onto the fishing vessel, no passes, nobody paid. And one guy said, he knows how to run a ship. And so we get-- no sooner were we all settled on the ship-- we were sitting against the cabin. And there's a reason I'm saying that.

But a man came running on the quay. He says, you're crazy, there's no motor on that ship. There is nothing sitting there. This is my boat. And as he said that, the boat turned over because it was overloaded with people. We were OK because the cabin against which we were sitting became to floor for us. But the people on the other side all fell into the water. But then people came. And they threw down ladders. They came down. They helped us all up to the quay.

And I imagine, all around the harbor, there were people trying to get on any available boat.

Well, anything. And people were desperate. I mean, even non-Jewish people. It wasn't just Jewish people. Everybody ran. The reason, especially, the Belgians who had run-- the French also were kind of frightened-- is because in World War I, the Belgians didn't capitulate quickly enough to suit the Germans at the time. So they were quite brutal.

The Germans were quite-- yeah.

The Germans were quite brutal with the Belgians because they didn't capitulate. Of course, all I know is what I was told.

Right. But for the Belgian people, they were generally just very fearful now.

Exactly. And so the boat capsizes. You, fortunately, don't end up in the water. But you're not on a boat, either.

Right. Then people threw down ladders. Men came down. And they helped us all up.

So what did your mom do then?

OK. Then we walked. And we saw a train station. And we went into the train station, which was packed with people. People were sitting on the floor, sleeping on the floor everywhere. And people just took any train. There were no tickets being sold anymore. So we tried to get on a train. We didn't even care where it was going.

And then mom came up with this scheme. If we can get to the end of France, then if we can go over to Switzerland, and we'll go from there to America. And then we'll send for Charlotte. Everything was always, we'll get there and then we'll send for Charlotte. So we did make it as far as Boulogne-sur-Mer after basically spending about three days or so in the train station on the floor. In Boulogne-sur-Mer, we walked into a cafe.

Is that still a French city?

Yeah, it's a northern France city. Means Boulogne on the Sea, actually. And the Germans marched in right after we arrived there. But they didn't bother us. And we stayed there. A woman in a cafe let us sleep in her place. And then an order came out that everyone who wasn't a French resident had to return to their country of origin. So we got it back. We even hitchhiked with German soldiers. So the Germans are there now, the army, and they're telling everybody, you've got to go back to your country of origin. So in your case, you had what?

Our residence was Belgium.

Residence was. So you had no choice but to go there. Where was it-- I'm going to backtrack just a little bit. You told me about an incident where there had been some looting.

Oh, yes. Yeah, let's go talk about that. What happened is one day, Mom, in order-- because the lady who gave us shelter didn't want us to pay for anything. So Mom, as payment, helped her in the cafe. She had first closed the cafe because she wasn't going to serve, as she called them, [FRENCH]-- the dirty-- it's a slang word for German, [FRENCH]. But she wasn't going to serve any. But she was forced to reopen the cafe. And then Mom said, she'll help her as payment for our lodgings and all that. So she did.

And while Mom was working, we kind of roamed the street, my sister and I. And we saw people running into shops and coming out with loaded arms of things. What had happened is right after an alert, some of the shop windows were broken and all that. So people just went in, loaded up merchandise, didn't pay for it. They just took it and went. I had been admiring a pair of white boots in this one shop. Every time I passed it, I would look at the boots. And I just wanted those boots. As a child, whether it's war or whatever, you want what you want.

So I saw these people. And I saw the boots sitting there in the window. And nobody was taking them. So I went in. And I had my little sister with me. And I took the boots. And there was a raincoat too that I liked. So I just took the raincoat and the boots. And I took them with me. And we left very quickly.

And when I got back to the cafe and Mom saw what I had, says, where'd you get that? Well, Mommy, everybody was taking. She says, you stole. I said, no, I didn't steal. Everybody was taking. And nobody stopped them. So she took away the boots. She took away the raincoat. And I saw her hide it under the bed. And she said, I'm going to give those back to the owner.

But then she was working one day. And I decided that I wanted to wear my new boots. And I quietly snuck the boots out and the raincoat. And I put them on. And I went walking in the street. And then all of a sudden, I felt someone grab me by the collar. And I turned around. And there's a man. And he says, where did you get these things? They're from my shop. And I said, no, they're not. I have them. I bought them. He says, no, you didn't.

And right then and there, he plopped me down the sidewalk, caught my raincoat, pulled off my boots. And people were standing around laughing. They thought it was so funny. I was upset. But they thought it was funny. So then I made my way back with my little sister to the cafe, and of course, had to answer to Mama and all that. And I learned a valuable lesson. I never stole again for the rest of my life.

And of course, your mother, as you mentioned, was working in a bar that was frequented by German soldiers.

Right. That's why the woman didn't want to open it. Everybody had to serve the Germans But nobody ever discovered that she wasn't a Christian. The whole thing didn't last that long.

She also had to act as though she wasn't German, didn't she?

Well, of course. See, we understood German because Jewish people spoke a language, Yiddish, and it really has some Germanic origins. So you can understand German.

She wouldn't converse with them in German?

No, you pretended you did not understand.

Did not know the language. So you're forced to go back to Belgium now.

Right. And we made our way back, just about the same way. And we did some hitchhiking. We hitchhiked with German soldiers,

German soldiers gave you a ride.

But we didn't talk. Mom just said, Belgie, Belgie, Belgie. Well, we literally-- her original plans were put aside because she started feeling very badly about having left my sister, in a way. And so she had to go back. We had to find my sister. And as a matter of fact, for the rest of her life, and I said, she's the only one who survived, the rest of her life, she kept mentioning that I should have never-- I shouldn't have left her. And to this day, I don't know whether my sister has ever forgiven her. Says she has, but I don't know.

But your mom made a decision that there were two of you that she knew she had you.

Well, it was basically if anybody read Sophie's Choice, you had two children.

And had to make a choice.

And right then and there, I think she wasn't even thinking. But she felt-- as we talked about it, and she was old already, she had to make a choice. She'll save two instead of losing three. And as it turned out, you were able to go back.

Yes, we found my sister. Well, when we got back to Antwerp, they did have my sister because they had brought her back.

She'd been in good hands.

Yeah, she was fine. She was fine, but angry, very angry.

Then what happened? Now, you're back in Belgium. Germans are-- they're in control. What happened then?

Well, at first, we went back to school. And by October of '40, Jews had to register. But even if you didn't register, they knew exactly who you were. And things started changing. Food started being rationed. When Jews registered, we got the stamp on the identity card-- no star yet at that point. And then Jewish men start being called up for forced labor. And so my own relatives went. They came back a few months later. This happened twice. They came back.

At first, we went back to school. And things seemed normal. But it wasn't quite normal because shortly after that, Jews didn't no longer get food ration stamps. There was a curfew at night. It was 7:00 PM of Christians, 8:00 PM-- I mean, 8:00 PM, Christians, and 7:00 PM for Jews. Everything changed. Everything just changed.

Then afterwards, without giving you a specific date, afterwards, we could no longer go to school. First, we wore the star. You had to wear a star. As a matter of fact, of course, you showed one up there. I have one original one left. When you went, they came on a big bolt, like fabric to us, and they cut them. OK, four in the family? They cut a strip.

Off of a big bolt of--

Of a big bolt.

--material with stars on it.

Right. Just had a strip, with instructions on how to apply them to your garment. And when Mom came home, she noticed that she had an extra one. And her first reaction was she threw it in a trash can. And then after a moment's thought, she went into the trash can, retrieved the star, this one, and said, you know, in case you tear your star or you stain it, so you won't get punished, we have an extra one. Suddenly, this became precious. Excuse me, allergies.

And amazingly, you have that.

Well, I had-- what Mom did is she took this extra star, and slipped it in a photo album, and totally forgot about it. Mom had one obsessions. She didn't care about any material things. But whenever we ran, no matter where we ran, the one thing that went with us all the time were our photographs, family photographs. And that's why I have photographs today.

And she clung onto that that whole time.

That's the only thing she hung on to.

So what happened next to you, then? Things became far worse. You're forced to wear the star.

And then slowly-- but let me just-- there was one little-- I missed that whole darkness. We were lucky, if that's what you can call it. There was a few sparks of lights for us. Before the war, Dad had a friend. His name was called Fischbier. They worked together. And he would go home to Germany on the weekend. And when he couldn't, he stayed with us. He was Christian. But he shared our Sabbath and all that. We called him Uncle Karl.

But he was from Germany?

Yeah, from Germany. He would come. And most of the time, he went back to his family for the weekend and came back to work Monday. Because the '30s, work was hard to get. And when he couldn't go, he stayed with us. And we called him Uncle Karl. And we didn't know that-- we didn't even realize that he was not Jewish. But then once Dad left and the war started, we didn't see him for a while.

Meanwhile, people started to vanish. A van would pull up in front of our apartment building and would come out with several men, several teenage boys. And they would take off. And couldn't figure out why they're being arrested. Sometimes, they came once a week, sometimes, twice. Sometimes, they didn't show up for a few weeks.

And our first reaction was well-- well, the adults were talking about it. I was still a kid. Well, they must have done something wrong. They must have broken a law. You don't think that you'll get arrested for no reason. No. And this kept going on. And then there would be a lull. Nobody would come. And then all of a sudden, same thing came again.

And they would just disappear. That would be it.

They would just disappear. And we didn't find out why. And meanwhile, the food ration stamps were taken away from Jews. You no longer got food stamps. Also, we had to give up our bicycles. We had to give up our radios. And bicycles were really transportation. They were not--

Recreation-like kind.

--recreational things that we have today.

Take it away and your mobility's cut off right then and there.

Precisely. You couldn't go to work. People lost their jobs, which was another side of it. Things became tighter and tighter, really became difficult. Meanwhile, Karl showed up. One day, Mom was trying to make curfew. And someone called her name. And she turned around and just saw a uniform and started to run, figure, oh, I'm getting arrested. The kids will be alone.

And the uniform ran, and caught up with her, and said, it's me, it's Karl. Fani, where are you running? And she said-- she recognized him. What in the world are you doing with that uniform? I won't say the word. What do you mean what am I doing that uniform? I'm German, I was drafted. And he started--

He was a soldier. He got drafted.

Exactly. He was an officer in the regular Wehrmacht. And he started, he said, you have enough food? She said, you know better than that. No. Mom and I smuggled for a while over the French border because we couldn't get food rations there.

Considerable risk to yourself.

Yeah. So what we did is we'd buy food on the French side. And then we'd come back. We sell most of it, keep some of it for ourselves. And the money that we earned was-- we were able to buy our food with. But that didn't last long.

I don't know if we'll have time today. But that's where you had, in effect, be a decoy.

Actually, I was the decoy.

You were the decoy when the food was being shipped around.

Yeah. And I was a good little actress. What happened is the way we were able to get food over the borders, we had asked German soldiers to help us because they were in check. And this one day, we couldn't get anybody to help us. So Mom and I had to make it over the border by ourselves.

And we had taken an empty doll's box, which was actually from one of my dolls. And we brought five kilo of sugar, which we filled the box with. And when we got to the border, the customs agents came. So I was holding the box like this. Came over to me and wanted to take the box from me.

With the sugar in it.

And I said, you can't take it. That's my brand new doll. And you're going to break it. He said, no, little one. I just want to take a look at your doll. I just want to see it. No, you can't. You're going to drop it. And you're going to break my doll. And he kept insisting. But he wasn't getting-- physically, he wasn't really becoming, how can I say, strong about it--

He wasn't grabbing that hard.

--grabbing. He wasn't. He wasn't getting violent about it. So and when he kept insisting, I said, Mommy, Mommy, he's going to take my doll away. And he's going to break my brand new doll. And I did a good job because the guy said, OK, go, go, go with your doll. And we went over the border. But not only did I have the doll, but Mom had some wool fabric around her wrapped around herself under her clothes.

Five kilos of sugar too.

Yeah, and the five kilo of sugar, right.

So Karl, then, starts helping the family.

He started bringing us food. But it was really a very strange time. Because I said, people kept disappearing. And then our neighbors, even though we shared the food with them, said, what are you doing with that Deutsch, with that German? And no matter how much Mama tried to explain, they couldn't tolerate it. So she asked Karl not to come anymore. And he stopped coming.

And we hadn't seen him for quite a while. And then one day-- meanwhile, my aunts and uncles from Antwerp, slowly, because of the men being called up again for forced labor, and a lot of them kept coming back, what they did is they secretly went to Brussels. It's easier to disappear in Brussels because in Antwerp, you had a specific Jewish community, which was very homogeneous, almost. Whereas in Brussels, the Jews were more spread out.

Much larger city.

Right. You were able to disappear a little bit better. So they slowly, secretly ended up going to Brussels. And we were still in Antwerp. And then one day, we hadn't seen Karl for a long time. And all of a sudden, he showed up very late at night. And he came in, didn't even say hello after Mom opened the door, and said, Fani, if you can, take the kids and get out of town. She says, why? Just do as I tell you, threw up his arms in the air, and left. I have to actually attribute my survival not only to luck, but also to Mom's acting constantly.

Her willingness to make--

Her willingness. She immediately moved. She made quick decisions. And we went. So what she did is she took off our stars, kind of scraped the coats and everything not to see the sewing. And we put a double layer of clothing on. And the only thing we took were our photographs and a grocery bag that would not be obvious-- no suitcases or anything. We just literally locked the door. What she had forgotten is that we had the star in one of the albums.

And in it, we still had a hurdle. We could take a train to Brussels, takes only 40 minutes. But we still had a hurdle to get over because Jews in Belgium, especially-- well, this is an identity card. This is a Belgian identity card of a citizen. In addition, if you were Jewish, you had two red stamps on the card.

Right on the front.

On the front in Flemish, Jood, and Juif in French. And at that time, trains were being stopped before they reached their destinations. And Gestapo, that's the secret police, would come onto the train, ask for identity. And if you held up a card, they didn't even have to read it. They saw two red stamps, they knew you were Jewish. But in addition to that, Mom's card looked like this. Actually, this is mine. But there's no story now. That's what Mom's card looked like.

With the red band in it.

With the red band, the yellow as a foreigner. She was not a Belgian citizen. And it wasn't easy to get citizenship. And it had two words-- foreigner in two languages. And in addition to that, one stamp here, a red stamp, and a red stamp there, meaning Jew. So if they came up to the train-- because they would stop trains quite frequently-- and say, documents, and you held it, then you would be taken off. So that we had to get over that. But we did manage to get to Brussels.

And at that point, you're trying to then kind of evaporate into Brussels. But before long, your mom knew that you had to take a more concerted effort to hide the children. Actually, the interesting part is that that came from a principal of a school. Mom felt that education had to go on.

We were very lucky. My aunt had-- my mother's youngest sister, who unfortunately didn't make it with her husband and her little boy-- had already settled in Brussels. And they had a very kind neighbor who helped them. And that neighbor had a friend. And the friend lived in another building in Brussels. And they allowed us to use their name. And they helped us rent a small little place in their name.

In their name.

Right. Which is sort of secret, we weren't the ones renting it. And Mom decided to enroll us in school. She felt education had to go on. And I think she also underestimated the risks involved. So she enrolled us in the elementary school there.

Using that family's names?

And using that family's names.

The principal did not ask her for any identities or anything. She kind of guessed that we were Jewish kids because in Antwerp, you go to school in the Flemish language. In Brussels, you went to school in the French language. You had to learn French as a second language in Antwerp. But in Brussels, no one had to learn Flemish. So she enrolled us. And she saw that we had some difficulty with the language. So she kind of surmised.

So she'd gather, right.

And she pulled me into her office one day. There were several things there-- pulled me into her office and said, Flora, I'd like to speak to your mother. There, we did school no more-- maybe three weeks. I don't even think it was more than that. She says, I'd like to speak to your mother. I said, we were good. Why do you have to speak to my mother for? We're behaving. It's not-- I just need to speak to her.

There was a youngster in my sister Charlotte's class. Even the teachers were afraid of her because if they said anything that she didn't like, well, she says, I'll get my brother on you. Her older brother had joined the Nazi Party in Belgium. There were fascists. In every country, you find people like that. So everyone was frightened of her. And she threatened my sister. And the principal had heard that.

So she had Mom come to school. And she told her, look, Mrs. Mendelowicz, I know you're Jewish. And I want to help you. My mother denied it up and down. And she says, look, please, I want to help you. So she and-- Mom gave in. You had to trust somebody. So she introduced her to a gentleman, a Catholic, who had a factory and who also worked with the resistance. And he made Mom fake identity cards like this.

With no red stamps.

No red stamps on them, with the fake name. And he gave her a gold chain with a cross to wear and gave her a job in this factory. Every factory worked for the Germans. But at night, they worked with the resistance in the cellar at Mr. Ranson's factory.

This was Georges Ranson.

That was Georges Ranson, right. And so he ran a business for the-- providing goods for the Germans.

For the Germans because he had no choice to do that. At night, he worked for the resistance. And at night, people from the resistance were-- and some of them were his own factory workers-- worked for--

The resistance at night.

--the resistance in the cellar. And Mom did too. And after a while, my mother's younger sister-- one day-- try to see how to do this. My aunt and my uncle were settled in a building about three blocks away.

Across the street from their building, there was a little pastry shop. And a woman owned the pastry shop. Occasionally, she would sell bread to my uncle, even though they didn't have the food stamps, because she knew there was a need. And they didn't have enough money. She just gave them the bread. But anyway, one day-- we were still, though, walking the street. It was very strange because we were still walking the streets at that time in Brussels.

Posing in a Christian town.

Right, because Antwerp, right after we had left, a couple of days later, Mom said to me, Flora, you go back and see why Karl wanted us to leave. I said, why do I have to go? Why don't you go? She says, because it's easier for a child. So she says, you go back to Antwerp. And you warn the people and tell them, something's going to happen. Because once she had us in Brussels, suddenly, it occurred to her, but why did he want us to leave?

So I went back. And I came back into my neighborhood. And it was very, very quiet. And I walked the street. And then I went to our building. And I figured, I'll just rang one of our neighbors' bell. Nobody answered. So I went through every single bell. And no one answered. So I pushed the door. The door was open. I walked through the building. And it was empty. And then I walked the street.

And being a very obedient child, I figured, I can't go back to Brussels without having fulfilled mom's order. So I kept walking the streets. And it was incredibly quiet. This would come into the streets, and break windows, and beat up people. All these things had been happening already. But here, I'm walking the street. And there's no one to talk to in my neighborhood.

So finally, it was getting to dusk. And I said, I better go back and tell Mama that I didn't have any-- I couldn't go back and say, I didn't deliver your message. So I figured, well, I have to go back. Besides, I was scared of the dark. And I heard knocking near my foot. And I looked down. And there was someone in a cellar window going like this. So I went into that building and made my way down to that cellar. And there were about-- I don't know if there were eight, 10, 12 people in there. I don't remember the number.

In this one cellar, really.

In one cellar. And they were just there. And I said, Mama said, you've got to come with me. And they said, Flora, it's too late. I knew everyone there. It's too late. They were here already. I said, who was here? They said, the man with the truck. That's just the way they put it, the men with the truck. I said, well, then you come with me. They said, no, no, no. Nobody knows we're here. We have enough food for a few weeks. We're staying right where we are. So I said, but Mama said, you have to come. They said, just go tell her that we're staying here.

So I left. And at least I was able to tell Mama, I gave the message to someone. I went back to Brussels. And when Mom saw me, I mean, the sigh of relief. She had been-- she told me, I'm so sorry. I should have never sent you. Thank god you're back.

So anyway, after she went to see-- to put me back-- this time, went to see the principal. And the principal introduced her to Georges Ranson. And then as I said, he wrote that. And my aunt and uncle, one day, had just walked over to my mother's apartment to visit. And as they were walking back, the lady from that little pastry shop, that bakery--

The one with the bread.

--stood in front of the building. And she saw. She says, Alex, Leah, turn around. Go back where you came from. They just raided your building. So they didn't have to-- nobody had to explain. Everybody knew. They turned around, came back to our apartment, never went out again, period. They were there for over eight months. They never went out anymore.

Living in your apartment after that.

Right. And there was a train that was by the side of that building. And they only filled water when the train passed by so no one should hear them flush the toilet, things like that. Meanwhile, Mr. Ranson took me into his home. His brother took one of my sisters in. And the third one would be-- his secretary took the little one in. But we couldn't stay there too long. And he had a cousin, a Franciscan nun. And she agreed to take us and hide us. He did not tell her superior that we were Jewish kids. So Mr. Ranson took us.

First convent now.

That was the first convent that we were going to be hidden in. And I would have probably been able to stay at Mr. Ranson's. But Mrs. Ranson was afraid that he was risking her life and the children's lives. And she felt that he had no right to do that. So he felt it was better. And that goes for his secretary and the brother.

So he took us on a flatbed truck with each one of us under an empty wooden crate that was turned upside down, all around, and on top, filled crates with vegetables, and fruits, and all kind of stuff. And then occasionally, he would stop on the road to let us take care of physical needs, give us a little water, or something. And I remember that we were, of course, urged to be very quiet, especially if the truck stopped because there were checkpoints. And I'll never forget it. I have allergies. Of course, I didn't know at the time it was allergies. I didn't find that out till I was an adult. The truck would stop at a checkpoint. And I thought I was going to choke because--

You're still hidden underneath the boxes.

I'm hidden underneath, right. And we're supposed to be very quiet. And I remember hearing somebody ask, what have you got there? They looked at his card. What have you got there? And he says, well, you can see, I've got fruits and vegetables. I sell this stuff. And one of the people checking, I remember hearing that, said, well, it says on your card that you're an industrialist. He said, but you know, it's wartime.

You see, in Belgium, Belgian cards, you have your name, your profession, your photograph, the date of birth, the place of birth. And every time you change addresses, a new address gets added. You don't have-- here in America, we just change the address. You walk around with your life.

They know exactly where you've been.

Literally, on both sides-- where you've been and where you are.

What your job is.

Exactly. So they knew he was an industrialist. So they let him go because in wartime, they understood that. And meanwhile, I thought I was going to choke. And I said, well, better I choke alone because if I make any noise, my sisters be arrested and Mr. Ranson will be arrested. So I said, I'll just choke to death alone.

But what happened is I was also frightened, scared of my mother because before we left, she said, Flora, you're in charge of the kids. Make sure they don't betray themselves, give themselves away their real name. And it was not uncommon that this happened. Or, she says, just make sure they retain their faith. And she said, if the Gestapo gets me and I don't come back, find your father in America and take the kids to him. And then she stopped. And she wagged her finger. And she says, god help you if something happens to the kids.

I did ask her years later about that. And there are a couple of people here who-- you knew my mom. And I asked her about that. She says, Flora, did I have a choice? I said, how could you have done this to me? I was so young. She said, did I have a choice? Says, the name of the game was survival, not psychology.

And you had to take responsibility.

Right. This was after I had studied child psychology.

Well, I'm very worried about us running out of time before you have a chance to tell us about Father Bruno.

OK. Let me skip through it. We were fortunate, because amidst this darkness, while millions of people were being destroyed in concentration camps, we were able to survive because of a fuse box of humane light. And those lights were many people. I'll just-- Karl, Mr. Ranson, and the nuns who helped us. And let me just describe Father Bruno. I'd stand on a rooftop and shout his name. I do have his photograph. It's quite large. So I don't know if you can see it or not. I'll hold it up. Anybody wants to get a better look, you can always come up and ask.

I said, I would stand on a rooftop and shout the man's name. And you'll go through the exhibit, those of you who haven't been, there's a freestanding white wall at the end. You can't miss it. If you look under Belgium, you'll see the name Abe Bruno Reynders. And that was this man.

I connect with this. He made fake identity cards for adults that he hid. He hid us. First, he hid us in a Catholic orphanage of the Sisters of Saint Joseph outside of Brussels. Unfortunately, we were betrayed there. I don't know to this day whether it was advertently or inadvertently.

And you don't know who did it, either.

And I don't know who did it. All I know is one of the nuns came middle of the night, they shook me, woke me up, and just went like this. And then she told me to dress my sisters. And they got us out of the building and back to Mom's apartment. But as I said, I've gone back, but I don't know. So I can't accuse anyone because it could have been inadvertent. I have no idea to this day.

But the bottom line is they knew you had to go immediately.

Exactly. But while we were there, Father Bruno even came to find out if we were being treated well and if we had enough food. We really didn't, but we said we did. And then he hid us-- the last place we were hidden was a convent, also on the Flemish side, in a small town called Ruiselede, which was just about three hours from where Anne Frank was hidden. I don't know if anybody knows the name Anne Frank.

Had Anne Frank lived-- I'm alive. I've had the opportunity to have a beautiful life. I'm married to a wonderful man, whom I married when he was wearing the American uniform. And I have children. I have grandchildren. I had a wonderful career. And I'm here to talk about what happened. And I'm Jewish. And I can be alive in our wonderful country. God bless America.

And Anne Frank and a million and a half other children were killed simply because they were Jewish. That was their big crime. But had that little girl lived today, she would be exactly one year and one month older than I am today. And I'm here and she's not.

That's especially poignant because I think it's easy to think, especially for younger people, Anne Frank is a historical figure from a very long time ago. But the reality is--

I'm alive.

--she'd be sitting right here today herself.

She could have been sitting here with you as could a million and a half children. But then again, they wouldn't have to be sitting with you here in a Holocaust museum if they would not have-- if we didn't have murderers to kill them.

And fortunately for you and a few others, the likes of Father Bruno made it possible for you to survive.

Yeah, he was incredible. Even when he gave a child into hiding, he said, our job is to save this child's life. The child's not to be converted.

You spent over a year in that last convent.

Yeah, 13 months to be precise.

13 months. And as far as everybody there knew, you were a Catholic child?

As far as everybody knew. Of course, the Mother Superior knew better and all that.

Mother Superior knew better, right.

Yes, we were Catholic children, right.

But even then, you had some close calls. And before we wrap up--

We did. We did.

--tell us a little more.

I'll just name you one. There was one day. By that time, also, the Germans were losing the war. And German soldiers were also going AWOL. Not only-- so they were searching for these soldiers because they knew that convents sheltered them and Christians sheltered them.

So it's not just the Nazis coming and looking for hidden Jews, they were looking for soldiers.

But they were also looking for hidden Jewish children because they knew that Belgians hid children. Percentage-wise, more people, Jewish people survived-- percentage-wise, not numbers, because of course, it's a small country, so the numbers were smaller-- percentage-wise, more people, Jewish people survived in Belgium than in many other places simply because of the-- although you still had fascists, you had Nazis, everything-- but because of people like this.

Maybe take just a moment before we close to talk about the incident in the potato cellar.

OK. When they would ring the bell, somebody would ring the bell, a nun would look through a little peephole. And if she saw a uniform, first thing they did is hide us. And this particular day, this happened. And the nun said, muh. And we knew already. We knew. So we were taken down to this potato cellar. Because the convent was a farm and they had to share the produce over to Germans. They were able to keep some of it for themselves.

So they had a storage cellar-- potatoes, and apples, and things like that. And one nun came to hide us quickly into the cellar. And we hid behind a big pile of potatoes and literally held our breath. A few seconds later, we heard the door of the cellar opening up and these heavy footsteps, probably boots-- we never saw them-- coming down and someone yelling, raus, raus, [GERMAN], raus, raus-- out, out, is anybody there, is anybody there.

And of course, we just were so quiet. They walked back and forth, shouting, back and forth, shouting. And then we heard potatoes rolling from the front of the pile. And we were just a few feet. I don't think the pile was bigger than this rug. They were just a few feet from us. And for some reason, they never walked around the pile. And they left.

Like you say, this rug, a pile of potatoes. You're here.

Right, exactly.

And the Germans--

And they're right here.

--are on this side.

Right, exactly. And they left. Of course, we didn't move for a long time. Then finally, we dared to move and go out. And we were safe.

And this came--

I know. We came this close.

They weren't as methodical and as efficient as they were supposed to be.

There was several-- a lot of incidents like that. But we were just-- I don't know if God wanted me to live so I could talk to you people and maybe-- and hopefully, the younger ones among you will remember what I'm telling. And in the name of those who were killed, you work to make a better world, a world without hatred. Hatred-- nobody wins with hatred, nobody.

Was it there that you were liberated?

Yeah, we were liberated right there.

Which there's a whole story you could tell us about the liberation itself.

Right, exactly. We could have another two hours about that. I'll just give you one incident. As soon as everybody-- people start screaming, our liberators are here. We're being liberated. Actually, we were liberated by Polish unit attached-- in exile, Poles in exile who were attached to the British Army. But as I say, people were starting up, we're free. We're free. And everybody ran out into the street.

And we saw a few tanks rolling down the street. And from the church-- there was a church at the end-- there was a white flag hanging. And the tanks there-- and on one of the tanks-- I'll never forget this-- there was a soldier sitting, waving to us. And the tank went and all of a sudden, they reached the church, grenades were thrown from the church from the white-- exactly where the white flag was, right atop the tower. And the tanks swiveled around and came back. And the soldier on top that had waved to us, all bloody.

Well, we're really out of time. I'm going to, I guess, exercise the prerogative here and just take one or two quick questions. Even though we are out of time, I'd like to ask, if anybody has one or two questions they'd like to ask, and then we'll wrap up. I guess, probably, you're all wondering on some level if you could just say a little bit about how everybody in your immediate family survived and were reunited with your father.

Right. we were united. So the American Army-- actually, my dad was in the army at the time. And he, with the help of a soldier, they traced him. And we were taken-- the American Army then took us over. They said, well, we'll take care of you as the family of one of our soldiers. And then they started giving us some food and things like that.

And as a matter of fact, on the Christmas morning, the doorbell rang where we lived. And Mom told me to go to answer door. And I went down to answer the door. And I opened the door. And there was an American soldier standing there. And he said, Mendelowicz? I said, oui in French. And he says, merry Christmas. And he hands me a box. I didn't know what merry Christmas meant. I knew no English at that time. So I had no idea what the word meant. And he takes off.

And I ran up. I said, Mama, Mama, a soldier brought us a box. A soldier brought us a box. And we opened the box. We didn't notice the letter taped to it. We opened the box. And it was filled with food. And we ate, and we ate, and we ate, and we all got sick because we weren't used to eating all kinds of rich food, especially were even a few bars of chocolate. And I'm addicted to chocolate. One shouldn't be addicted to anything, but I'm addicted to chocolate.

If you're going to be, chocolate's OK. That's right.

So after she recuperated, she looked at the letter. And it asked her to-- it told her that her husband was a member of the American Army, had asked her to present herself at the military headquarters in Brussels, which she did. They gave her a day after the holiday. And then they told us, well, now, you're the family of an American soldier. And now, we will take care of you. We will take over.

And then they did. And then they brought us to the United States on an army ship. The ship is also bringing war brides. And everybody on the ship thought I was the war bride because by then, I was almost 16. And they couldn't understand this man was bringing my mother and my two sisters with me. They married this?

Family deal.

Was a family deal. And then we arrived. And it was kind of strange. We hadn't seen my dad in over eight years. The little one didn't even remember him, the second one very vaguely. I remembered his face. But I thought he was taller. I had forgotten that I had grown a little bit. And there were two men who came to meet us. And I looked. And I figured the tall one must be my father. But the face wasn't right. The other one, he wasn't tall enough, but the face was the right face. Then of course, I learned that the smaller one was my dad.

But I was difficult to deal with because teenagers are difficult to deal with anyway. And I was very angry with him because I had the attitude that he had abandoned us and that we had all these difficulties because he went away. But eventually, I matured, and understood, and grew to love him again.

And I wish we could not only hear more about many things that you had to skip over about the time leading up to liberation, but also about getting yourself established in this country. I'd like to just remind everybody that First Person takes place each Wednesday through August 28. And next Wednesday, the 12th of June, we'll have another first person.

And it just so happens, our guest next week is in the audience with us. Regina Spiegel, if you might just wave. Regina, who is from Poland, will tell us about her experience in various slave labor camps and ending up in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen before her liberation. So hopefully, some of you will be able to come back next Wednesday, and if not, on another Wednesday until the 28th of August. It's our tradition that our first person has the last word. And so I'd like to turn back to Flora just to say her last thoughts to close out today's program.

I hope, with the help of you and those that you can reach, and you tell them that you've spoken to someone or heard someone who went through the Holocaust-- and I didn't have the worst of it because I was never in a concentration camp. I don't know if I would have been here to speak to you. But I just keep wanting to urge you, preach love. Preach love. Because we all-- if we scrape our knees, we all have red blood. We all cry with salty tears. When we're happy, we smile. When we're sad, we cry. We have hearts that beat. So except for the surface, we're not really that different.

And it's like a beautiful garden of flowers. They're called flowers, whether they're a rose, a tulip, a chrysanthemum, or what. But they're all called flowers. And that's what we could be-- a beautiful garden of flowers, and be friends to each other, and share with each other, and care for each other. And it could be a beautiful world for the next generations to come. But we have to work at it. It's our job to do that. Thank you.