Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. This is our fourth season of First Person, and today's "first person" is Mrs. Livia Shacter. And we shall meet Livia shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experiences during the Holocaust and during World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. Each Wednesday, through August 27, we will have a First Person guest. The museum's website at us-- excuse me-- www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a preview of upcoming First Person guests. This 2003 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Wallenberg Foundation, to whom we are grateful for sponsoring this Year's program.

We will listen as Livia Shacter shares her first person account of her experience as a survivor and during the Holocaust for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Livia some questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have several requests of you. First, it's our hope that you'll stay seated throughout the hour program. That way we'll minimize any disruptions while Livia is speaking. Secondly, during our question and answer period, if you have a question-- and we hope that you do-- please try to make it as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so that we all can hear it, including Livia, and then Livia will respond to your question.

I'd also like to let those of you who are holding passes to the permanent exhibition for either 1:30 or 1:45, know that they're good for the rest of the afternoon. So no sense to feel like you might miss the permanent exhibition if you stay to the end of our program.

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims. 6 million were murdered. Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

As we will hear today, Livia Shacter was a young woman living in the small town of Tacovo, Czechoslovakia in early 1939, when Hungary marched into and occupied the portion of Czechoslovakia where Livia lived. And in a matter of weeks, the Nazis began deporting thousands of Jews to death camps and into slave labor.

Livia and her family were taken to Auschwitz. From Auschwitz, she was forced into slave labor. In April of 1945, Livia was liberated, and eventually came to the United States in 1947.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with the introduction of Livia. We have a map of Europe in 1933, with our arrow pointing to Czechoslovakia. Livia was born April 2, 1917 in, as I mentioned earlier, Tacovo, Czechoslovakia.

Like thousands of Jews before them, Livia and her family were deported to Auschwitz, and the arrow shows where Auschwitz was located. Livia stayed at Auschwitz from May to August 1944, and was later moved to several different camps.

In March of 1945, she was liberated by the Americans in Salzwedel, a labor camp in Germany. Later, in 1945, she went to Linz, Austria, and stayed in a displaced persons camp there. And in 1947, she immigrated to California.

Upon her arrival in the United States, Livia went to Los Angeles and soon began a 30-year career with the Prudential company, having been trained by IBM on the massive UNIVAC computers. She retired in 1981, but being someone who can't sit still, which remains true to this day, she became active in Holocaust-related activities, including spending 20 years at the Wiesenthal Center of the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.

Livia moved to Baltimore to be closer to her family in 2000. She immediately joined this museum speaker's bureau as a volunteer, and Livia has spoken to many large groups over the years, including law enforcement and the military. She was also featured in the Academy Award-winning documentary The Long Way Home.

Livia has two daughters, one in Baltimore and one in Israel, and has 11 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren. And I'm pleased to say that Livia's, daughter Elaine Berkowitz, is with us here in the front row. Elaine if you don't mind, a little wave so people know you're there.

We are about to learn a great deal more from Livia about her experience during the Holocaust. And with that, I'd like you to join me in welcoming our "first person," Mrs. Livia Shacter. Livia, will you join me?

[APPLAUSE]

Livia, thank you very much for joining us, and for your willingness to be our "first person." You were 22 when the Hungarians marched into and occupied the portion of Czechoslovakia where you lived in 1939. You describe to me that up until then you had had a wonderful life. Perhaps we could start today with you telling us about your life, about your family, your community, in those years leading up to that time in 1939.

OK. I come from a family of five brothers. I was the only daughter. We lived a nice life. It was wonderful. The Czechs were-- it was a democratic country, so everybody had the same rights. We voted. We had everything. So, until '39. In '39, the Hungarians march in overnight.

Livia, before you talk about that period, maybe just a couple more questions about your family. Tell us some-- tell us what your father did. What was his occupation?

My father was in business, wholesale exporter. Where I come from, there were a lot of apple orchards. And the apple growers sold the apple on the trees. My father bought already, the event was blooming. And then, when the apples were ripe, then they picked them and they shipped them to every country in Europe-- Germany, and Hungary, and countries where they didn't have apple. So that was my father's business.

In 1932, one of your brothers was actually living in Germany, and you took a trip to see him in 1932. You were 15 years of age. Although Hitler would not come to power for another year. Do you recall being aware of the threat of Nazism.

Yes. Yes. That's when I first found out about the Nazis. Because where I come from, first of all, we didn't even have a radio at that time. Come from a small town. If there were two radios in the whole town, it was a big thing.

So when I went to visit my brother, I found out that there is a Hitler who hates Jews, and hates all kinds of other people too. And they demonstrated.

In one street, one Sunday, there was-- they had it in the papers that they're going to demonstrate. On one street, the Nazis, the SS marched down the street, communists and socialists. And then they got together in one park, and they started fighting there, and screaming. So that's the first time I found out that there's somebody who hates Jews.

Once you returned to your home in Czechoslovakia, in those years, between 1932 and 1939, did you sense growing antisemitism at all in your community?

No. No. Because I come from a town, maybe 15,000 inhabitants. And there, everybody dealt with somebody. My father had the best friends who were gentiles. And they had-- they were the farmers or the apple growers. And he dealt with them all the time. So we didn't feel it.

I went to public school with-- next to me sat a girl, a Hungarian girl, or whatever-- Czech. And we were the best of friends. We didn't know anything about-- until '39. We didn't even know that-- what's going on in Germany.

The only thing we know, I had my brother, who I mentioned. See, Hitler didn't have his Final Solution right away when he came to power. But he knew he hated Jews. So the first thing, first order was every Jewish-- what do you call it-- if somebody was from a different country, they had to leave-- foreigners. They had to leave.

So my brother was a Czech citizens. He married in Germany. And he was there working for his father-in-law. So now, when this order came, he grabbed his two suitcases, and his wife and a baby, and they came home.

But there he didn't have much to do in this small town. He was a very intelligent men and he-- so he, there was a lot of Jewish organizations which started groups going, all those German immigrants who came home, who had to leave Germany, they made groups, and they took them to Palestine that time. It was Israel.

So he went to Palestine.

Yes, in '34.

You had another brother who actually went to the United States, too.

Yes.

Tell us quickly about that.

He came here with the last ship before the Americans broke up the relations with the Germans. It was in '38, in December. Matter of fact, he still went. There was a mobilization, that when the Germans wanted to go into the Sudeten-- Sudeten to be-- I don't know if you know the part of Czechoslovakia where the Germans owned it first, before the First World War. The Germans wanted to go in there. The Czechs mobilized, and they thought they won't let him.

But in the meantime, they saw they are not prepared. The Germans were prepared by that time already ready for war. So they mobilized all the boys.

And my brother was a military-- matter of fact, two brothers. And so he was called in. And he had the visa to come to America already in his pocket. They called him to go for the visa to Prague.

But the mobilization was over. They didn't have anything. So he went to his office there. And he says, will you please let me go first before anybody else is released, because I have the visa. And if I'll be late, then I will miss it. So they let him go. The Czechs were wonderful to Jews.

So he went to Prague and from there straight to America. And then when the war started here in '41, he volunteered. And he went to fight the Germans. But they sent him to the South Pacific, where he was needed, I guess.

But he served as a soldier for the United States Army.

Sure, sure he was a veteran. And after the war, I came. He didn't know where that they took us away, and we didn't know he's a-- in the military, because we couldn't write anymore. Only through the Red Cross. That was much.

Livia, you said to me, as I recall, that in March 1939, one night, you went to sleep in Czechoslovakia and you woke up in Hungary.

That's right.

Tell us about that.

So we didn't know what's going on. See, we didn't-- no one knew about that the Hungarians will come into us. But the Germans, Hitler approached the Hungarian leader, and he said, if you give me food for my vote efforts-- because Hungary had a lot of-- it was an agricultural country, and a lot of food was growing there. So Hitler needed food. So he said, if you give me food, I help you get back what you lost in the First World War.

See, in First World War, where I come from was Austria-Hungary. But then Czechoslovakia became a country in 1918. So, naturally, they made a deal.

So overnight they just marched in. The Czechs didn't know what hit them. They ran away. And we became Hungarian under Hungarian rule, not citizens. And this, the problem started at that time.

And what differences did the Hungarians make almost right from the get-go when they came in? How did your life change?

The first thing they did, they gathered all the-- from 18 to 42 men to go and dig the trenches for the Germans at the Russian border and wherever. They wore military clothes, the boys, but-- the men-- but instead of weapons they gave them a pick and a shovel. And they had to go and dig. Thousands of them died of hunger, of exposure. It was terrible. And so there they were.

And that included one of your brothers.

Two. I had three brothers, but they release one brother and another.

OK. So and also, what they did next, the Hungarians, they took away Jewish business licenses from the Jews. Well, we still had to eat, so we had to do-- we had to have a license, business license. Without that, even a shoemaker had to have a business license, or a dresser or a tailor.

So my father took a friend, a neighbor who was Christian. And he said, if you take a license out by your name, then I'll do all the work. My father did all the work. And he shared 50/50 with that partner. So that was terrible for us. Very hard.

And all kinds of things. And then they wanted us to prove that we were citizens in that part of the country, because in the meantime, after the First World War, a lot of people came from Poland, from wherever, and settle there. These people were-- they did what the Germans did.

They came overnight with trucks, and they said, come on. Take. They take a suitcase so whatever. And let's go. And they took them away and dropped them somewhere in the Polish border.

And they, the Polish, said, they are not my citizens. And they said they are not our citizens, the German Hungarians. So a lot of them perished there and whatever.

So here you had lived there your whole life, and you had to prove--

Prove that my great-grandfather-- not just my grandfather-- my great-grandfather lived there, and got married there, and died there. So this was very hard on a lot of people. But we knew my grandparents lived-- my great-grandparents lived-- in that part of the country.

So I went. And I-- we stood hours, from 4 o'clock in the morning, to wait for to get records. So I found my great-grandfather's records, that they were born there, and they got married there. But my great-grandfather came here in the late 1800s. So here to America. So I couldn't prove that he died here. Only the great-grandmother.

So that was terrible. Because America, with Hungary, was that time already enemies. So I couldn't prove it, and I cried, what will we do now? We won't get our citizenship paper.

But we never got to that. Never. We applied for the citizenship. And it was too late, I mean.

To get a visa to come here.

Yeah.

Livia, at that time, things were obviously very hard. Your father had to work out the deal with the Christian businessmen. You began to also earn a little bit of money. Can you tell us about that?

That was the biggest pain my father ever had, that his only daughter had to work. See, today, you young people, it's nothing. Everybody works. But at that time, a girl didn't work if she could help it.

So I love to do things. I embroider and whatever. So I loved-- I learned to embroider on a machine, just for myself, for my own, monograms and everything. Without a monogram, you couldn't be.

So I said to my father-- see, they were dressmakers. At that time, it was very stylish, and blouses, and dresses, and monogram. So I said to my father, I'm going to make-- I had a good friend who was dressmaker. And she's going to pay me for it.

He says no, no, you don't. And I didn't ask. And I made money. And I gave it to my father.

He had tears. That the only time I saw my father with tears in his eyes, that his only daughter had to give him money, that he has to take from me. And that's the minimum. That's the least problem.

Livia, you lived there under the Hungarian occupation for five years. During that time, did you know what was happening to Jews elsewhere in Europe?

No.

No?

No. See, the newspapers didn't print anything, the truth. And radios didn't say anything because that was against-- the Germans wouldn't allow it or whatever. So we didn't know.

The only thing, there were rumors. And the rumors were terrible. The rumors said that if the Germans should come in to us, they're going to take us away. They're going to kill us. And those who are able-bodied young people, they will have maybe a chance to work out and survive.

But I was always a optimistic person. I could never believe in rumors. Why should anybody hurt me as long as I behave? That's how naive I was. So we didn't know anything.

No.

No.

And as you told me, you were there under the Hungarians for five years. And you said to me, all in all, you managed. You were able to get by as a family--

We didn't have a choice, yes.

--until 1944, of course, which is when the Germans invaded the portion of Czechoslovakia, now Hungary, that you had lived in through those years. And what had been bad for the previous five years became overnight horribly, horribly worse. Tell us, some, what happened, as you put it, when the Nazis showed up in your town.

Yes. In March of '45, one morning we get up, and the Nazis showed up. When they came, they were in a big hurry, because we were the last Jews to be taken away from home. So when they came in, they gave right away all kinds of orders.

The first order was, every Jew from six years of age had to wear a yellow star on their outer garment. If we walked out on the street, they saw there was a Jew, they wanted to beat us up, or even kill us. Why not? They did what they wanted.

It was scary terrible.

And they also, they were drunk, and they ran into a neighbor of mine, who-- his boy, the Nazi noticed that this boy looked Jewish. And so he came in there, and he ran after the boy to the parents. And he said, you Jews, you're at fault. That that's why it's war, or whatever.

So he saw they were drunk. And he started beating, with taking out his bayonet and beating on the table and this. He says, I'm going to kill you.

And this poor man-- he was a poor man. He was a worker [NON-ENGLISH]. He says, please, we didn't do anything wrong. What-- what-- no, they were.

So OK, they said. I leave you now, and I'm going away. If a little later I come back, and I'm gonna-- you better be here. And I'm gonna kill you or whatever. So that's the way it started.

Every day something else. Curfew. And every day they gave a different order for three weeks.

And after three weeks, the order came. Everybody move into the ghetto. There was no ghetto in our town before. They took the slums of the town. They closed it with a big fence all around. People who lived in those slums, they moved into our homes, and we moved into those-- to that ghetto.

We moved in a little [NON-ENGLISH]. The only thing what we could take along was one mattress, each person, and a knapsack with the most necessary things-- a change of clothes, a piece of soap, a toothpaste. So when we moved into the ghetto, as many as there was room for mattresses on the floor, that's how many people moved in into each little room.

We were watched by the Hungarian police and military. We couldn't go into the city. And we just waited what's next. The rumors here are too terrible. They're going to kill us. They're going to take us away. So there we were for four weeks in the ghetto, locked in, not knowing what's going to happen tomorrow.

And then, one morning, the order came. Everybody line up on the street, five in a row, and started walking to a train station. We grabbed our knapsack, and we started walking. We walked to a train station, which was not far. It was a walking distance. When we got to a train station, as far as the eye could see, there were Catholic cars lined up on the street, on the lines, on the rails, hundreds of cattle cars.

They counted into each cattle car 100 or more people. They brought sick people from their sick beds, infants, babies. A Jew is a Jew. Everybody into the cattle car. The only thing what they gave us, a pail of water and an empty pail for a toilet. And they locked us in from the outside.

The train started moving. We didn't know where we are going. We couldn't look out. There were no windows to see where we are going. There were-- no one told us anything.

So just to give an idea how much room we had, we could stand straight or stoop on our legs-- not sit down and stretch out the leg. There was no room for it. We were so crammed together. At night, we couldn't stand any more or stoop, so we laid on top of each other on the floor.

The babies and the old and the sick cried day and night. They were so miserable. So were we, but-- and I didn't mention. My parents were 57 years old. Young-- I mean, healthy, able-bodied.

I had two brothers also. I had five brothers originally, but I had only two brothers at home. So the five of us were taken away. My two brothers were 24, 22, and I was 26, close to 27.

You said to me that when you were so cramped in there that you tried to stoop in a way to help your parents stay up.

Yeah, the three of us, my two brothers and I, we tried to make a little room that my father and mother can sit at least on the floor with to stretch our legs or whatever. It was terrible.

And that water, it went very quick. We used it up quick. And--

One pail of water.

Yes. And the empty pill, they filled up quick, and it spilled. And it was on the floor. Don't ask. It was terrible.

And you were in that train car for how long?

Three days and three nights, constantly going. Finally, the train arrived. We arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau. That's one of the biggest death camps, where they killed the most people. We didn't know where Auschwitz was, or what-- anything about Auschwitz. But when they opened the doors on the cattle car, what we saw on the platform, Nazis going up and down with a loudspeaker by their mouth, and giving orders. Everybody jumped down from the train, about that high, no steps. So we started jumping.

The men and boys lined up five in a row in one column, women and children in the other column. Started walking. So we did what we were told. I didn't even say goodbye to my father and brothers. I didn't even see where they disappeared amongst thousands of men.

And we started walking, my mother and I. We lined up with the women. We started walking.

Shall I mentioned it, the little baby. As we walked a little distance, where a woman with a baby in her arms was carrying the baby, was in front of me. That poor baby couldn't even cry anymore, it was so worn out, so hungry. It was starving.

So the mother was so upset, and put the baby on the shoulder, and shake it, and, whatever. Nothing helped. The baby was crying because it was so starving.

So while the mother was so busy with the baby, all around her, the women started-- were so sorry for them, for the mother and the baby, that they started giving advice. Why don't you do this or that? Maybe a baby will--

Nothing helped. The baby was hungry, and the mother didn't have-- see, we didn't know we'll be three days locked there in the cattle car. I imagine she didn't bring fresh milk with the baby, or if she nursed the baby, she herself didn't have any food.

So while other women start-- look at her, and we stopped. Our column stopped. And thousands of women behind us are waiting. We should continue going.

So a Nazi in the distance notice that we are not moving. How dare we not move. We were told to move.

So we came to investigate. What's holding us up? He came there, grabbed the baby-- he saw the baby crying. Grabbed the baby from the mother's arm, threw it against the ground there, in the cement ground. The baby's head cracked open. The problem was solved. Now you better-- we better walk.

This is the first time my optimism started being shaky. If a man can take an innocent baby and kill it for no other reason, just because it's angry, something is very wrong. Maybe all those rumors were true. OK?

Now we walk. As we walk in the distance, I saw five buildings with chimneys reaching the sky. It looked like big chimneys. From the chimneys, black smoke and fire was belching out. I wonder at that time, what-- and the air was polluted. You couldn't see who stands next to you.

I wondered that time, what kind of factories do they have here? I didn't know of crematories. I thought factories, chimneys like this. Those were the crematories, there where they burn human flesh and hair, and all that stench.

Also, while we walked, no one to ask or anything. We are not supposed to talk to anybody anyway. So on one side of the road, there were big territories they closed with electrified barbed wire. And those were the camps, a lot of camps.

All this while I-- we walk. In the camps, I saw wooden barracks. All this just seeing.

So we reached a crossroad, which were left or right. There stood the Angel of Death, Dr. Mengele. I don't know if you heard about him, but I have no time to talk about him.

He stood there with a stick in his hand giving a glance at each person in front of him-- not even second. To the old and the young, he motioned to the left, to the able-bodied young people, to the right. And that's the last time I saw my mother.

Didn't even have a chance to say, goodbye, Mother, I hope you don't work too hard, because I was sure that she too is going to work somewhere. If I go to work, she too. She could work. But she's older, so there she goes with her generation. So I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye, I hope to see you, or anything.

She went left. I went right. And all of us young women, thousands of us, were led to a building.

And between each camp, there was a road. So we went we were led there to a building where the two doors opened. Five of us walked in at the same time.

[SIGHS] All around the wall stood Nazis, again with the loudspeaker. They always had one hand on loudspeaker and one hand on whip, to give us orders or beat us.

So the order-- everybody strip naked. Was a shock. Strip naked? What will they do to us here? No questions asked. We had to do what we were told.

And also, by one wall stood about 10 young men, our boys. I call them concentration camp inmates. Boys who were brought there before us. And they were doing their dirty work, whatever.

So they stood there with the a clipper in their hands. And when we undressed, we walked further to them. And they shaved our hair completely. No hair, no clothes.

And we walked further. And there were women inmates who threw to each of us one dress and one pair underpants. The shoes, we kept our own shoes-- not stocking. Only the shoes.

So they didn't ask what size are you, but if somebody was a size 20 and got a size 10 dress, because these dresses were from previous transport-- who got my-- who knows who got my dress?

Anyway, so I was lucky, and I'm going to always tell you I was lucky, because I'm here to tell you, so I must have been.

So I got a big dress that was ankle length, that was so wide that the wind just went up and down under the dress. I walked around like this, because it was-- Auschwitz is a mountainous area. And when we arrived there, it was still in the morning. And the evening, especially, was pretty cold. I walked around holding the dress together. The wind shouldn't go up and down underneath.

And they led us-- 30,000 of us were led-- led us to a camp. Each camp had a letter, like A Camp, B Camp, C Camp, and so on. I got in to C Camp.

When we got in there, they counted into each barrack 1,000 women. And we got in, but we saw there were three-layered bunks-- not bunk beds, but you know, shelves, like wooden boards. They counted on to-- those boards must have been planned for seven or eight men comfortable to lay on that shelf. They counted 14 women onto each shelf.

We looked at each other. Where will we have room there and the 14 women. No questions asked. We had to decide how we share that space. We decided head to toe, head to toe.

And we lay down on our side we couldn't lay on our back. There was no room for it. So that was our sleeping quarter.

Just, Livia, just so I understand. So each of these shelves, 14 of you on each of the shelves--

That's right.

--going up.

Yes. So this was-- all they did, they didn't ask us are you hungry, are you thirsty? Nothing. It's the fourth day not eating.

So the following dawn, we went to sleep. And the following dawn, it was very early, when Nazi women came with whistles. They woke us up. And they said, out for roll call, OK?

We jumped up, and we ran out. We didn't have to dress because we slept in the same dress, and always in the same dress.

So we ran out. Between each barrack there was a space for 1,000 women, five in a row. And they started counting us. There were two or three Nazi women. They had so much fun just looking at our faces. We were so miserable-- cold, hungry. Every misery you can think of.

So they had fun, and they counted, and counted. And I stand there, freezing cold. The sun wasn't out yet.

And all of a sudden, I feel a bang on my back. Where did that come from? I'm just looking. What did I do wrong? I wasn't supposed to stand like this. I was supposed to stand like a soldier to be counted. They didn't tell me, but I had to know.

So that was the first beating. They beat us for every little thing.

OK, so we stood there for hours. Finally, they got to the end. And there were about three or four women missing of the 1,000. They ran back to the barrack and found them there. They didn't come out, not because they didn't want to. They must have been so weak, or sick, that they beat them to death. Didn't have to come out anymore.

So this started out. So finally they let us go back in the barrack, and they brought us our first breakfast. The breakfast was a barrel of brown, bitter water. It was not coffee. It was some roasted grain. Who knows?

No cup or bowl to drink it in. They brought a can about this size, a rusty can. They ladled them, 14 ladles of that bitter water. And they hand it to the first one who laid on the end of the bunk. I was it.

I got the can in my hands. I was so empty and so hungry. I could have drank that whole can. Bitter or not, who cared? One good thing about it, it was warm, and I was freezing cold. But so were the other girls. So we had to decide how we'll share that breakfast.

We decided that each of us will get 15 sips at first. After everybody had 15 sips, if there is still some two or three sips, OK, we'll share that.

Before I have a chance to drink one sip, 13 pairs of eyes on my bunk are looking at my neck how many times I'm going to swallow, because if I swallow one more sip than I have coming, that's how much less they're going to have. That's the way it works when you're hungry.

So there was one ladle for each of the 14 of you in that can.

That's right.

And you worked it out to take 15 sips each--

Sips at first, yes.

At first, to get through all 14.

That was our breakfast.

That was your breakfast.

Yes.

OK.

So we shared all right. That was our breakfast. It was the meal for the day. All day, nothing. We didn't do anything either. We just sat around in the mud. And the sun came out. So we ran out, and we sat there in the dust, in the mud, and cried on each other's shoulders, and whatever, and just waited. And rumors terrible. And here we see fire going day and night from the chimneys.

So some of the girls, I were just sitting there and not going anywhere. And so some girls saw young man, are boys pushing carts with our belongings, what we left in the cattle car. So between the camps there they pushed those carts.

So the girls ran to the fence, and they called out, boys, do you know where my father is? My mother? My brother? My-- everybody asked for somebody else.

And they tell the boys that we came yesterday from so-and-so town, and they went to the left while we came to the right. Do you know where they are? Are they working anywhere? They had a question.

These boys looked at these girls very sad, and they said, do you see? And they point to the fire, to the crematories. They said, do you see that there the fire?

Sure, we say. What does that have to do, especially, maybe their parents were in their 40s, not even 57, like mine.

So they say, all the people who went to the left are burning there. The girls looked at the boys. They're not kidding. It didn't look like they are kidding.

So they came back where we sat around and told us the terrible news. What could we do? Just cry a little more.

So this went on like this. In the afternoon, again roll call. And they brought us our first dinner.

The dinner was a barrel of garbage-- real garbage. They shoveled the garbage from the garbage dumps into the kettle and boiled it, and that's what they brought us to eat.

Now again, 14 ladles of that garbage. I get the can in my hands. I take it to my face. I shudder. I shake. I can't take it. It smells terrible. It looks terrible. I can't take it. But I was old enough to know, if I won't have anything in my stomach soon, I'm going to starve, and I wasn't ready to starve.

So I held my nose. Didn't want to smell, didn't want taste. And just swallowed my share and handed the can to the next girl.

There were girls-- we were all old enough to know. I mean, how long can you be hungry? So everybody tried. So these-- some girls tried, and they gagged. It came back. They swallowed one, and they gagged. It came back. They couldn't drink it. So they handed it to the next girl.

We were there three or four days. The first three or four days, every morning we found a dead girl next to us. They just starved. They didn't have to be killed otherwise.

So this went on like this, day by day, the same garbage, and the same roll call. And they don't take us to work. I hear the rumors too. If they won't take us to work, we going to be taken to the crematory. So this went on like this, day by day for six weeks.

After six weeks, one morning, Mengele showed up in our camp. As I told you who he was. The Angel of Death, we called him.

So when he came to our barrack, he told us again, undress. And we walked by him naked. And he looked us over from top to bottom. Those who were already just skin and bone went on one side. Those of us who still had some meat on our bones, we were on the other side.

And all those who were already so skinny and weak, they were taken away. We never saw them again.

From then, on every two weeks, Mengele came, weeded out those who were already so skinny and weak, because every day people got weaker and weaker. So after two weeks, he came again, and weeded us. And after a while-- he came every two weeks.

After a while, we said, why is he coming? We didn't know they are taking them to the crematory. Sooner or later, we all going to look like them. Why does he have to take them away? No questions of that, and there was no answer.

So I was still August in Auschwitz when the order came. Where I mentioned that I was in C Camp. C Camp was one of the camps where we didn't go out to work in Auschwitz, because they kept us there for the future slave laborers to send to Germany. They needed in Germany for the factory's workers. Then they just had to call, send us 5,000, 10,000, as many as they needed, women. And that's why he came always to check if we--

So, Livia, so, essentially, when you arrived in March of 1944, you were put into the C Camp and just essentially left on hold just in case they needed you.

That's right.

And in the meantime, people got weaker and died. And as you said, they would weed out the weak and the sick, still, with some of you staying reasonably healthy enough in their eyes that you could still work if they called upon you.

Yes.

And finally, in August of 1944--

August, they asked for 6,000 women. So 6,000, I was one of them.

All of you out of C Camp?

Yes.

Yes.

And they took us to the train again, and took us to-- and again a shower, for the change. After four months, a shower. And they gave us a different dress and a pair of wooden shoes. My shoes, they took away already. It was not good. So wooden shoes. No stocking, no pants, nothing.

So they took us to a city called Fallersleben. When we got to Fallersleben-- that's in Germany-- 3,000 got off the train and the other 3,000 continued somewhere else. And here, Nazi women led us. And here we were happy that they took us away from Auschwitz. Now we have a chance to survive, if we're going to work. That's the rumors.

So Nazi women waited for us, and they led us to our living quarters. On one side of the road, there was a big building. That was the factory. The factory manufactured landmines. Across from the factory--

I'm, sorry. They made landmines?

Landmines, yes.

Landmines. OK.

That's what I was told. I don't know if it's true. Anyway, across from the factory there were the living quarters for the workers. Now, naturally, when they built this, it was good. The buildings were nice. And here I'm going to mention a lot of things which was a luxury compared to Auschwitz. Anything would have been a luxury.

So they put us up here in big rooms there, with bunk beds what you know, one on the bottom, one on top, with a thin straw mattress and a thin blanket. That's luxury. Can you imagine? And they gave us a washcloth-sized towel and a piece of soap.

The soap didn't look like soap at all. The soap looked to me like a piece of gray rock, rough. You could even see it was-- and we used to have back in the backyard rocks like this. OK, so I didn't expect French soap. But this is what they gave us.

So after the war, I found out what kind of soap that was. Shall I mention it? The soap was called "Jewish soap." After the war, I found out.

So why Jewish soap? So I'll tell you how wonderful the Germans were. They took away people from France, and from every country in Europe, and the first thing, they took the people and they killed them. But they also took away everything they owned-- jewelry, whatever, art, everything they owned. So things can be replaced. But they killed those people. So how did it work, the killing?

All the people who went to the left-- I'm going to take an example, the mothers with the children. Same thing, the fathers with the boys. The mothers with children go to the left, and there were Nazis. They always lied to us to calm people down.

So the women started screaming, where are my husband, where are my boys, what's going on? The Nazis said, calm down. You're all going to go now and take a shower. After the shower, you're going to dress up, and you're going to go to work. Well, it's war. Everybody has to work.

The war comes to an end, you're going to go home and find your husbands and sons. So those who believed them, they didn't stop crying, and those who didn't could just scream more.

So they led them to a building, which was the shower, a big room. Outside, they had to undress. And inside, the shower had a lot of shower heads in the ceiling. And the mothers with the children undressed. They walk in, and they wait. The shower should start.

But they didn't start until they were full. There were so many people pushed in that they shot at their feet that they should go in more and more. They stood on top of each other. Mothers had to pick up children, put them on their shoulders, on their heads. Otherwise they would have been trampled.

By that time they realized something is very wrong. If they wanted them to take a shower, they couldn't even get wet, because they were so pressed together.

They had on the roof, there was a faucet. They turned on the faucet. Instead of water, gas started pouring on these people. They couldn't catch their breath for a minute, or half a minute, or two. I don't know. Slowly, less and less cries until everybody was dead.

They opened the doors, took out the bodies. And before they took them to the ovens, they pulled off their gold teeth. See that time, older people had mouths full of gold teeth. That time, we didn't have plastic like now, natural looking. So they had tons of gold teeth from the Jewish mouths. Anyway, they shipped it to Germany.

So now the body is ready to go to the ovens. The ovens were built so that underneath the ovens there were trays. And when the body was burning, the fat was dripping into those trays. And that fat was used for soap.

But that's not all. Oh, yes. The hair. They made mattresses out of the hair. That too.

OK. So that's not all. The bodies were still burning until there were only bones left. They crushed the bones and used it for fertilizer. See how wonderful they were?

Now I'm going back to work.

So back at the work camp now, you said that, comparatively, it was luxury compared to Auschwitz--

Sure--

--because you--

Oh, we had a shower.

You could take a shower. I was going to ask you about that.

Yeah, we had 10 showers for 1,500. Matter of fact, I didn't get to that, that they divided us, when we arrived there. 1,500 worked two weeks the days and two week nights, 12-hour shifts. And for 1,500 people, when we came back from work, there were 10 showers.

The Nazi women stood outside the shower and timed us. We couldn't be there more than two or three minutes, because the other people had to go in. We didn't even get wet before we had to get out already. And as I told you, we didn't have a towel. We had a washcloth-sized towel. Anyway, this was much better, a luxury compared to Auschwitz.

What kind of work were you forced to do down there?

The work itself, I never saw the finished product. We were-- whatever they told us to do. I happened to be by a big machine. We had two girls on one side and two girls on the other side, and said they are political prisoners, I guess.

Polish, and Italian, and French boys brought sheet metal. And they put the sheet metal into the machine. And we-- the two girls on one side pushed in the sheet metal on one side and pressed a button. And it came out on my side. I had to take out the left over, what's cut out. It cut out round pieces of metal. I never saw, but-- so.

And you did that for 12 hours a day every day.

Yes, yes. Mm-hmm.

You also said you learned later who owned that factory.

Yes, so that's just about 50 years after, I found out that Volkswagen was the owner there. So I don't know what they made there.

So this went on like this, from August till November or so. And we had, when we arrived there, they had already big holes on the ceiling where I lived, where we slept, and also in the factory. It was bombed before we came there. When the wind blew or the rain fell, it fell on us. And the rain blew on us.

So by November or so, one night I happened to be in bed. But the same thing was in the house-- in the factory when there was a air raid. And when the air raid was, the Nazi women came and woke us up, and quick to the air raid shelter. They loved us, you know. They wanted to save our lives.

So we-- by that time, I was so fed up with my life. I thought, I don't care if the bomb falls on my bed. Just leave me in bed. I was wrapped in that one blanket, and that-- and the one dress I slept in. And here I have to go out to the air raid shelter. But no, they beat us if we didn't go.

So we went to a shelter. And we were there until the air raid was over. And they let us go back to bed or to work. And this started at once a night. And then, as we got closer to end of '44, more and more air raids, so much so that by end of December, it was already, I don't know how many times, always get up and go back to bed, and go back there.

So by March '45--

Let me interrupt you just for a second. You told a little-- you told me about being in the shelter. There were so many of you crammed so tightly--

That we couldn't even-- Yeah. That we were told by Nazi women were outside our air-raid shelter. So they told us we shouldn't talk because we're going to use up the oxygen. We were so pressed together in that shelter that if we would talk that we would use up oxygen. That's a-- luxurious things.

So this continued until the spring of 1945.

March '45, yes. And that they bombed the factory. And we couldn't go back to work. So they took us to another city, to a train, and took us to another city called Salzwedel.

When we got there, we met there the 3,000 women who left Auschwitz the same--

[AUDIO OUT]

When we arrived there, there were, like, dogs everywhere, Nazis watching us. We were now 6,000 or even more. And they put us up in barracks again.

And those girls who were smarter than I was, or not as-- I call it optimistic. So they said, now, if we don't work, they're going to kill us now. Something to look forward to.

So there we were laying. And if we don't work, they stopped cooking for us. There were still big storerooms with all the rhubarb, and turnips, and all those.

And I didn't mention. I forgot to mention that the food was better too than in Auschwitz. When I fall asleep where I worked, they gave us a slice of bread, a day like this. And they also-- the bitter water still coffee that was in the morning.

And they gave us for dinner always rhubarbs, turnips, potatoes, all kinds of vegetables, which was much better than the garbage, but never enough. We were always hungry. So now, when we were at Salzwedel, where we were later liberated, there they didn't cook for us anymore if we don't work.

But they still had big storerooms with all those vegetables. They cut it up in little pieces and gave us a raw, maybe a half a potato size a day. And those who had the strength to go up and drink, or find something, rotten potato peel, something.

So there we were laying. I laid on my bunk, and just getting weaker every day without eating, without doing anything. But some girls, they were so hungry, they went out to look for something to eat. Ground was still frozen at that time. So they went out and found maybe frozen vegetables. I don't know what.

And every time they came back to the barrack, and they tell us what's going on outside. There were less and less Nazis visible every day. So the smart Nazis, they saw the war is coming to an end, and they didn't want to be caught there, so they ran away. So that was for six days they went out and came back, always telling us what's going on outside.

The seventh day, they go out as usual, and they come back, and they say we're liberated! The Americans are here!

Well, I could hear them, but I thought I'm dreaming, because all year I was dreaming about this, that one day I'd be liberated, and I go home, and I find my parents and my brothers. Never gave up on them. As long as I'm alive, I not them. They were healthy, able-bodied. So that's how naive I was, OK?

So now they say that we're liberated. I think, I must be dreaming. But these girls insist. Come on out there. You see it's true.

The last guards, when they saw-- there were, on the end, there were about 18, 20 guards left. When they saw half a block away the Americans coming, they opened the gates and started running. The Americans called out, halt. Don't run.

They didn't halt. They shot them, and they fell in the gutter. The hell with them. I don't know what happened to them.

So now these girls insist we should come out. That's true. So I thought, well, they wouldn't-- a joke as a joke, once, but they wouldn't say it if it wouldn't be true. So I have to go out.

And we crawled out. Couldn't even walk. Just hands and knees, people crawled out to see that miracle.

And when we got out, what we saw, by that time the American boys started coming in into the camp to tell you that I still feel so shuddered, that feeling after a year to see a friendly face. These boys looked at us and they couldn't believe their eyes. How can humans do that to other humans?

Not that we looked much like humans. We looked like skeletons covered with a skin. That's all. Our hair was a year's worth of length going every direction. Our dress were in tatters, just hanging, because that one dress.

The shoes, the wooden shoes, we lost one, or broke one, or whatever. We were barefooted. So you can imagine how we looked.

They were so sorry for us, these soldiers. And they right away did something. They brought trucks, and they took us into the city into military buildings. And we got to the buildings. They put us up in a little rooms with three, four cots in it, with white sheets. Can you imagine the luxury? And they put us up there, and they started feeding us.

The food was wonderful. It was what the American soldiers ate. But that was too rich for us. Our stomachs were so shrunk and so weak that we couldn't hold it. So myself, about half of us, I'm sure, got into the hospital-- myself too.

So we were in the hospital a few days. I got better, and I came back. By that time, everything was organized. They told that everybody has to register where we come from, because there were people from every country in Europe, from Greece, and from Italy, and from Romania, and from Hungary, from everywhere. So everybody had to register.

And we waited. And they fed us. And thank god, that was wonderful.

And so till the end, the war ended-- and my country was the first one to send busses for the citizens. And they took us to Prague, which was the capital.

And I, by that time I was stronger. So I thought, I was there one night. And I said, I have to go home. If I am alive, so must be my parents. So I have to go home.

So trains went everywhere. You didn't have to have money. Just live here. A train, you would wait, and you just got on and went.

So I ran home, and I didn't find anyone of my family yet. And I say yet, because by that time, I still hoped. OK, they are just maybe farther away. They didn't make it so fast.

I wait. Two of my girlfriends were home already, and they said Livia, come and stay with us, and let's wait together for our families. We did.

A few days later, we found out, young men, my brother's age, started coming home. We ran to these boys as fast as we had the strength. Boys, do you know where my brother-- did you see them? Did you work together with them. I had a million questions. Didn't know where to stop.

These boys looked at me and don't say a word. So why don't you say something? I'm very sorry to tell you. Your brothers won't come home.

What? I couldn't believe my ears. What do you mean? And I'm yelling at them. How can they say such thing. My brother's 6 foot tall, beautiful young man.

So now I'm laughing at myself. How can I be so surprised? Because all the-- what I saw there, being beaten and everything, it's-- people died of all kinds of things.

So anyway, so what happened? I asked them. So they tell me.

My brother worked outdoors in below zero temperature, and wore a cotton shirt and one cotton pair pants, a pair wooden shoes. 12 hours outdoors building or fixing railroads. So can you imagine, 12 hours in freezing temperature?

So that's when it came to me, well I'm so surprised. All the concentration camps, where I was too, if anybody got sick-- and I'm not talking a sniffle or ache and pain-- that's not sick. You had to be half dead.

They were very generous. They let us stay home for 24 hours without a doctor's help, without an aspirin. Miracle should happen. If we didn't get better. We didn't end-- go back to work, these people were taken to the crematory.

So that's when I realized my brothers must have gotten pneumonia, couldn't go back to work. They ended up in the crematory.

Livia, I'm going to turn to our audience if I can, just to see if we have a-- time for just a few questions. But before we do, can you tell us how many members of your immediate family that you lost?

Mm-hmm. Well, my first my parents and my two brothers. But 72 of my immediate family-- uncles, aunts, and first cousins-- not even once-removed cousins.

Mm-hmm. 72 members. Let's turn to the audience for a short period to see if any of you have some questions you'd like to ask of Livia. Yes, ma'am. And remember, I'll repeat the question.

Livia, do you think-- thinking back, was it your optimism that kept you going, belief that we're all going to be together. Can you even-- if you had let in that that's not what's going to be do you think you'd have been able to survive? Do you think it's the optimism?

The question is, to Livia, did your optimism, your belief that you would all be together again one day, do you think that made it possible for you to survive?

Yes. That's the truth. I hear that all the time from psychiatrists that I had in the audience. And they tell me that.

Because I never gave up. And I don't know if I would have known the truth. I don't think I would want to live.

Yes, ma'am.

What happened to your brother that was in the United States and was in the Army?

The question is, what happened to your brother who worked for-- went to the United States and worked for-- went in the Army?

No. Oh, oh, in that slave labor?

No, no. Your brother in the United States who joined the Army.

Oh, he came here to the United States in '38.

And served in the South Pacific.

Yes. No, he died already. He was older than I am, but he died early.

But he survived the war.

Oh, yes, yes. I came to him, and we stayed in his house, and with my daughter. She was that time 11 months old. Yeah.

I'm going to take the liberty, since nobody's raised their hand, to ask another question before we wrap up. And obviously, we don't have time to begin to touch on all that happened to Livia after the war. But Livia went to a displaced persons camp, and before long met another survivor, a Polish man. And Livia, are you willing to just share a couple of--

Oh, sure. After we were liberated in that displaced persons camp, all the survivors came there and registered. And we waited, everybody, to go somewhere. I had a brother here, so I was lucky that my quota was anyway higher. The Czech quota was higher than some other.

So to a brother, or parents, or sister, they got the first right to come here. So I could have been here already in '46.

But in the meantime, I'm a workaholic. I had to there too I volunteered to register people. They didn't know all the languages. I know only six languages. So I helped out in the office.

Six languages. You heard that, OK.

That's nothing new in Europe. Most people know more language. So there I met a man who was also a survivor. He was from Poland. And he lost a wife and a baby already, and also the whole family.

So we didn't have anything else to do. Just talk in the evenings. So after four days, he proposed, and we got married.

[LAUGHTER]

I know, I always get a giggle, a laugh about this.

And then--

Is that enough, four days?

But even then, once you got married, of course, now you're waiting for your visa. You finally get your visa. And--

And I'm sorry. Yes. So, in the meantime, I got pregnant. And I go to the UNRRA woman-- you know, the UNRRA was in charge there, in the United Nations Relief organization in the camps. So when I-- I worked there, so everybody know me.

And then I went to a doctor, and I found out I'm pregnant. I was so happy. I'm going to have my own baby. I lost everybody. So now it's my own.

So I go to the office, and there's the UNRRA woman. And I say, I'm going to have a baby I'm going to have- and you can imagine my English, but I could speak already that much.

So she says, oh, Livia. I'm so sorry.

What do you mean you're sorry? Aren't you happy for me?

No, I'm happy for you if you want to have the baby. But exactly that morning they ask me to come for the visa to come to America. That was in '46. In '47, already. No, '46.

Well, it spoiled a little that this. But I said, so what? I'm pregnant. I can't go to America because of that?

No, they were careful. Because in the boat to go, I can lose the baby. So I have to wait till the baby is born and six months old, and then I can come. So the baby was 11 months old when we arrived here.

But thank god I arrived, and I came to my brother to California.

In 1947.

Yes.

Well, Livia, I think we're about out of time. And I'd like to, of course, thank you for being our "first person" today. And it's just obvious to everybody that we could probably spend days just trying to learn as much as possible from Livia, because there's so much to tell us.

Before I turn back to Livia to close the program, which I'm going to do in a moment, I just would like to remind everyone here that First Person is a weekly program every Wednesday at 1 o'clock until August 27. Next week, on May 28, we will have another survivor as our "first person." And our "first person" next week will be Mr. Henry Greenbaum.

Mr. Greenbaum survived life in a ghetto as a slave laborer, Auschwitz also, and a death march. And so I welcome you all back next week, or any Wednesday, until the 27th of August.

It's our tradition at First Person that our "first person" has the last word. And I'd like to turn back to Livia for that to close our program.

I don't know what to say, but-- I can talk so much, but when it comes to saying something, I forget.

[LAUGHTER]

I just want to thank you all for coming, and I'm very happy in this country. I just hope God should watch over all of us here in the United States. It's the best country in the world. That's all.

[APPLAUSE]