

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 fourth season of First Person, and our first person today is Mr. Sam Spiegel. And we shall meet Sam shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust, who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust and during World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here in the museum.

We will have a First Person program every Wednesday until August 27. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a list of the First Person guests for each week until the end of the season on August 27. This 2003 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Woldenberg foundation, to whom we are grateful for sponsoring this year's program.

Sam Spiegel will share with us his first person account of his time during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Sam some questions.

Before I introduce him to you, I have a couple of requests of you. First, it's our hope that you can stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions while Sam is speaking. And second, during our question and answer period-- and we hope that you'll have questions-- please try to make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so that all of us in the room, including Sam, can hear it, and then Sam will respond to your question.

I'd also like to let those of you who are holding passes for the permanent exhibition this afternoon at 1:30 or 1:45 know they're good for the balance of the afternoon. So you won't miss getting into the permanent exhibition if you stay until the end of our program at 2:00.

The Holocaust was a 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's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

As you will hear today, Sam Spiegel, who is from Poland, was sent with his family to a ghetto after Germany invaded Poland. He was then sent into slave labor, first in gun powder factory, and then later in a factory that made and repaired trains. He was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. As the Russians advanced, Sam was forced on a death march, from which he eventually escaped. He returned to his hometown and tried to resume his life in Poland, but then came to the United States with his wife Regina.

We have prepared a brief slideshow to help with Sam's introduction, and our first picture in our show is of Sam Spiegel, our first person today. We next have a map of Europe, with Germany highlighted in yellow, and our arrow points to Poland. Sam was born in 1922, the oldest of five children, in Kozenice, a town in east central Poland.

His father owned a shoe factory, and his mother cared for the children and the home. Kozenice was a thriving Jewish community that made up about half of the-- excuse me, whose population was made up about 50% by the Jewish population.

In our next picture, we have the Spiegel family in Kozenice around 1938. Sam is standing on the far right, as the circle indicates. In this next picture, we have on the left Sam's father as a young man, around 1918. And on the right, we have Sam, his father, and his brother Wolf, this picture taken roughly in 1934.

And here we have Sam's public class in 1932 in Kozenice. And Sam is seated at the far end of the second row, again with the circle indicating where he is.

On September 1, 1939, German troops invaded Poland. That morning, the Spiegels heard an air raid sirens blaring and

quickly left their house. 15 minutes later, a bomb struck their home. Sam was 17 years of age. After German forces occupied the town, they began to implement anti-Jewish policies.

In 1940, Sam's family was forced to move into the Kozienice ghetto, a six-block area of town enclosed by barbed wire. In 1942, Sam was transported to Pionki, a forced labor camp that produced munitions. Three days later, Sam learned that the Kozienice ghetto was liquidated, and its inhabitants, including his family, deported to the Treblinka killing center.

We have here a map of the extermination camps in occupied Poland with our arrow pointing to the death camp at Treblinka. In 1944, Sam was deported to Auschwitz and then transferred to its subcamp of Gleiwitz. The arrow points to Auschwitz. And in this next photograph, we get a sense of just how vast Auschwitz was.

In January 1945, as the Soviet army approached, the SS evacuated prisoners from Gleiwitz. After four days on the death march in freezing cold, Sam arrived at Blechhammer, another subcamp of Auschwitz. That night, he and some other inmates escaped. After hiding for 10 days, Sam was liberated by Soviet troops. Our red circle shows the area around Auschwitz. And the small dots indicate the individual locations of Auschwitz, Gleiwitz, and Blechhammer.

Excuse me. Today, Sam lives here in the Washington DC area with his wife, Regina. And I'd like to let everyone know that Regina is here with us today. Regina you might raise your hand so everybody knows you're here.

[APPLAUSE]

Incidentally, it just worked out that Regina was our first person last Wednesday, so we have the two of them back to back, which is very nice.

Upon arrival in the Washington DC area in late 1947, Sam found work as a sheet metal worker, and over time built a successful business in the construction industry. Sam and Regina have three daughters and nine grandchildren, the most recent of whom was born this past year. Sam and Regina both volunteer here in the museum, and among Sam's many community activities, he is very involved with B'nai B'rith in developing and managing low income housing for senior citizens. And with that, I'd like to have you join me in welcoming our first person, Mr. Sam Spiegel.

[APPLAUSE]

Sam, thank you so much for joining us today and for your willingness to be our first person. Kozienice was a small town. And you had just turned 17 when the massive German invasion took place on September 1, 1939 and swept across Poland. Before we talk about that, perhaps you could tell us a little bit about yourself, your family, and your life before the German invasion.

All right, Bill. I come from a small town [INAUDIBLE] Kozienice in Poland. I was one of the oldest five kids. I had three sisters and a brother.

Before the war, we lived just like we live now in the United States. We didn't have exactly the good stuff like you have over here. We still had outhouses in those days. But till the war, we had a normal life. We went to school, And I graduated from school.

But when the Germans came in, and this was September the 1st, 1939, the first bomb that fell fell into our house. But luckily, we all got out.

Sam, I'm going to interrupt you just for a second. Before you tell us that, tell us a little bit about the size of your family. You had a fairly large extended family.

Well, yes, sure. My father had two more sisters, three more sisters, and a brother. But two of the sisters emigrated to the Americas before the war in 1928. And they lived in Costa Rica. But our grandparents and our cousins-- I would say our family consisted maybe of over 100 people in that town. Because in those days, you didn't travel like you travel in the

United States. The house that the grandmother lived, the kids moved in later on, and when our house was bombed, we moved in with our grandma-- grandmother. And my grandfather was already dead at that time, and we stayed with them.

The first orders that came out that all the old gold and old fur coats and everything had to be turned into the Germans. And if you didn't turn it in, you were shot. But Poland was a very cold country. And the fur coats that you saw my parents standing here that were worn weren't worn because you wanted to show off that you had you had a fur coat. You needed it, because the temperature used to go down to 30 below zero. So you had to have that kind of clothes.

In the next store, they came out that all the Jewish kids cannot go back to school. It's all right, you know, sometimes when you're young you feel that you want to take off a day and you don't go to school. But when they tell you that you can't go to school, it doesn't feel the same way.

Now by the end of 1941, the Germans erected a ghetto. They took six blocks mostly. Because usually, the Jewish people lived with the Gentile people together. But they evacuated us from the Gentile sections. They put us and they brought all the Jews into about six blocks, they put a barbed wire on and they had guards on the gate.

Sam, I'm going to stop you again. I just won't take you back if I can a moment.

Sure.

In that period before going into the ghetto in 1941, after the invasion of 1939, one of the things that you had told me is that among the many different anti-Jewish policies, the Germans, of course they took away all businesses.

Yes.

So your dad lost his business right away.

How did you-- in that time until going into the ghetto, how did you make ends meet? How did you even eat as a family?

We had cards, rations cards, which didn't amount to much. We got about 700 calories a day.

700 calories.

700 calories a day. But we knew a lot of people over there, and those people helped us out a little bit. And before they made the ghetto, you could mix with those people. They used to buy a lot of things. Let's say if you have a ring, you used to give the ring away, and you got some food for it-- not very offensive, but maybe potatoes and cabbage and bread. That was the most stable things that were used during the war.

So when they-- so not only did they confiscate the businesses and put your dad out of work and others, they also confiscated virtually all valuables.

All valuables.

So your ability to barter was very limited.

But, you know, you always had something because you figured you might need it, right?

Right.

Because Europe was different than the United States. In Europe, people always had some jewelry, because things-- the money used to change a lot, because they used to have a lot of wars in those days. So they always did something. They figured if a war will break out, you can always get food for something valuable. Because the money was not worth anything.

OK.

They closed all the banks. You couldn't get any money out the minute the war broke out.

Mm-hmm.

So that's how we lived.

Yeah.

But then when they made the ghettos, things started getting very bad. The sicknesses, and the dead, and the hunger, we had almost dead people, especially the cold weather. In the wintertime, there was no wood and no coal to keep the houses warm. And a lot of people died, especially the poor one die first, and the richer one will live a little bit longer.

But then the Germans started sending people out. They pick people up and sent them out to work. And when the-- when they built the ghetto when it started, when they came and they said we need some people to send to the East, a lot of people went willingly, because they figured they'll go out. They told them you'll go out for the day. You'll have a job. You'll be working. Maybe you can make some money and send it back home and your family will be able to live on. But it wasn't that way.

When they sent them out, we never heard anything from them. In the beginning, they made the people leave them in the van. They brought the van to the concentration camps, made them write a note home, and tell them what they had to write. That's what we read when it came back, but those people were not alive anymore.

They would say they were sending him to the east, have them actually write--

Write a little postcard, tell them that they worked, and they do know right, and everything is fine.

When you first-- when you first went into the ghetto, Sam, before that started happening, you were able to do some work within the camp for the camp's Labor Department.

No. My father's friend was the head of-- they built a Judenrat, which was a self-governing-- that the Jewish people governed the ghetto. And my father's friend was the president of the ghetto. So I got a job in the office, and I worked in the Labor Department.

And I had a lot of touch with the German-- with the SS. When they used to call they needed so many men every day, we had to supply them. Before they made the ghetto, the Germans used to come in and take everybody out they wanted to. But after the ghetto was made, they used to call to the Judenrat, and they tell them tomorrow we need 250 people to go out to work. And that's what we had to supply to them.

So let me ask you this. In the ghetto itself, you mentioned how just horrible the conditions were there. Were you still forced to try to figure out ways to barter in the ghetto?

I had the pass that I could go out from the ghetto. Because usually, all the Jewish people had to wear a band with the Star of David, kids since they were 10 years old. And if you were caught outside without a band, you were shot right away. But because I had the papers, I was going around.

And the German that was in charge of the Labor Department, his name was Rode. It was in September, maybe in September 1942. He came in. He said there's a big ammunition factory not too far in Pionki. It was one of the largest factories, ammunition factories in Poland. He said, we have to supply him some men to work over there. But we'll go out and take a look how it was. I think it was on a Thursday.

I went out with him, and he says, you're going to go to that camp. That camp was just opened over there. There were

about 6,000 people working at that munition factory. He said, you stay here. I'll come back on Monday, and we'll go back to our town Kozienice.

On one day, he came over, and he said, Sam, you don't have anything to go back to, because they took all the Jewish people out from your town and sent them away in cattle trains. We didn't know in those days exactly where they went to.

You all can imagine how I felt, but I wasn't the only one. There were a lot of people like me over there already that were working. And some of the people that were running in that camp, a couple of the Jewish people knew my parents very well. So finally, I found that I knew some people over there. And I stayed over there till 1944.

At that Pionki camp.

At that Pionki Camp. That's right. The work. But the slave labor camp is different than a concentration camp. In a slave labor camp, the men and women lived in the same camp.

We had problems in the beginning, because the people that were staying at the-- guards over us used to come in at night to the camp, and they used to beat up a lot of people. And sometimes they raped some girls. But the man that was running our camp, he was a German SS man by the name of Brent. It seems like he was a very, very nice fella.

And he gave out an order that the guards are not allowed to go inside the camp. They can only stay outside watching us come in from work and going out to work. So this was a big help.

So at nighttime, when we used to come, we could go out and visit some friends and get to know each other. That's where I met my wife Gina in those days. As bad as things are, in the slave labor camp, you could happen, but not in the concentration camp. You know, I was that time, I think, 19 years old. And Regina was about 15.

And she was working in the Pionki camp, too.

She was working. She was working harder than I did.

Sam, if you don't mind, tell us about your brother, who was taken with the rest of your family if you don't mind.

Because I worked in the Labor Department, before I left, maybe two weeks before, I sent them down on the job to the waterworks. But he stayed over there. In the slave labor camps, they didn't give you any clothes. You had to supply your own.

So the night, the day, the night when they took all the Jews out from our town, he went back home. He got out from the workforce. You know, it wasn't so easy. And he came home, because he wanted to change his clothes. He didn't have any clothes to wear too much. And he was taken away together with my parents.

So the day he came back just to get some clothes.

That's right. Yeah, that's right. And that was the wrong time.

How did you find that out?

Because a lot of people, they left about 100 people in our city to clean things up after the people left. Because they told you you can take anything you want with you, but they took a lot of the stuff away. So some of the people that came back told me that my brother went on the transport, too, with my parents. And that's how I lost my whole family.

And there you were at the slave labor camp at Pionki.

Yeah.

Tell us about the work did there. It was very hard work.

Very, very hard. But I was lucky over the two, because the people that knew me, I was detailed to the building industry. And I started working, helping the sheet metal shop. I didn't have a trade. I didn't have anything.

And I always worked inside, not outside, which was very good. And it was very cold over there, but the food was a little bit better, because we could bar still with the people-- with the other people that worked in the factory, too, that were not Jewish. We were about over 2,000 Jews, but another 4,000 were not Jews.

But they weren't slave laborers?

No, no, no, no, no. They went home at night. They went home at night to their homes, just like you go to a factory.

So regular employed workers working side by side with you as a slave laborer.

Absolutely. So we always got a little bit help that we had a nice enough food to eat.

If my memory is correct, Sam, you told me that because you were working in munition factory, you knew that in working with the powder, you knew that a speck of sand could actually set off explosions. And you did that.

I didn't work on the rollers that they rolled the ammunition. But the people that did did those things. So finally, before the powder that's caused-- it's made from a powder. And then when it goes through, when it gets ready, the last minute, if a spec of sand goes in, it blows up and it burns. And there's doors that you can run out right away, because you notice it. There were very little rooms where the rolls went through.

So a lot of them did those things. I figured they will sabotage a little bit. Maybe we'll help the-- we help the Allies. But the SS came in and said, from now on, you'll have to produce so many sheets a day. If you won't produce them in the 10 hours that you work, you're going to stay till it's going to be done.

So that was their way of getting rid of the sabotage.

That's the way getting rid of the sabotage, too. Absolutely.

You were starting to tell us a few minutes ago, Sam, that eventually, of course, as the Russians began to advance, it became time to move you out of Pionki.

Yes. The Russians started-- when the Russians started coming closer, we didn't know. We didn't have any newspapers. We didn't know what was going on. They brought in some trains again, and they were going to evacuate us. They didn't tell us where they're going to send us. They said we have to get away.

But before this happened, about three months before, there was a fellow that escaped from a transport from Treblinka. It was very hard to escape from there. But he went underneath. He was holding on to the train. And when he was running around, he didn't have a place to go. He came into our camp.

When he came in and says-- when they brought in the trains, he said people don't go on the train, because they're burning you alive. So we thought he was running around outside. He must have gone crazy. How in our days can you believe that a country like Germany was the most higher cultural country in Europe can do things like this in the 20th century? We didn't believe them.

But when they brought us-- when they took us to those trains, and sent us out, he escaped and they shot him. He didn't want to go on the trains. But when they brought us to Auschwitz, and when they opened up those trains, I don't know how long-- how many days it took, either five days or maybe six. Usually, now I know that from the place that we went to Auschwitz was only maybe a six-hour trip by train.

But no facilities. The trains were locked. So you can imagine when they opened up the trains, about half of the people were dead. And the other ones, the SS were standing with dogs, and with the whips, and shout raus, raus, schnell machen.

We didn't know what was going on. But I was with Regina on the same train. When I saw what happened, I says, Regina, I don't know what's going on here. This isn't a camp that you come to work. If any of us live through, we're going to meet in my town in Kozienice. That's the last word. And I haven't seen anymore since I was liberated-- until I was liberated.

That was your last word to Regina.

The last word till we were liberated.

And when I came to Auschwitz, they started picking up people, because they sent most of the Germans on the front line, so they needed somebody to replace them. And when they brought us, we were-- usually when they brought people from the towns, they were little children and women. But with us, we were all workers. We were still young.

And we found out after the war that Brent, that was in charge of our factory, went with us, and told the people that we are very good workers. And we're munition workers, that we need them now. Don't get rid of them. Send them out to the factories to work.

So the head of the camp at Pionki actually told the folks at Auschwitz--

That's right. Oh, he had the big rank. He was a very big man in the SS.

But he told them that you're valuable workers.

Right. Right. On the main, it was-- I didn't stay in Auschwitz too long, maybe four days. And one day, we stayed for Appells every morning. If it rained or shined or freezing, and it doesn't make any difference.

Appells-- that was like a role call.

That's right. I'm just going to bring some-- visualize yourself. You live for in Auschwitz. You don't own a toothbrush. You don't own any socks. You don't own shirt. You don't own anything except the uniform that they give you. And you wear clogs. That's all you wore. And usually they rubbed on your feet, so you got blistered.

But you lived with it. You didn't even have a towel to wash yourself. You lived-- an animal, when it gets cold, gets the fur on it. We didn't get it. But we had to live like this. We survived somehow.

It's amazing what the human being can go through if he has to. Nobody should be proven with it. It's very hard to tell in 40 minutes what was going on for five years. I don't remember what I ate yesterday, but I remember what I suffered over there. And I imagine all the friends, all the people that were over there, they weren't only Jews. There were a lot of Gentile, too.

The one camp I was in there was a Catholic priest. I forgot to tell you at the beginning when they came into Poland, they took all the intelligentsia, the Jews, and the Gentiles, and sent them away to the camps. Because they figured those are the people that can start something. And Hitler didn't go for any religion either. Didn't make any difference what kind of religion.

So I had a friend that I worked with him in the sheet metal shop and the building industry when we went in Pionki. He said, Sam, you're very handy. When they ask for sheet metal people, pick up your hand. It's a [GERMAN] in German. He says pick up your hand and tell him that you were [GERMAN]. So I picked up my hand, and they took me out. I was that time 19, 20 years old, fighting for 21.

And they sent me to one of the largest train factories in Germany, the Reichsautobahn Werkstatt in Gleiwitz. My friend was sent to a coal mine. We have a great God. That's how he controls it. I don't know why.

But when I came into that factory in Germany, and I went into the section that the sheet metal people worked, I figured I don't know the trade. What is going to happen to me here? But I picked up a broom. I was very young.

So you just said, I know sheet metal working, and you didn't know it.

Yeah, sure did. You know, I-- what did I know? I helped somebody.

Right.

And I was sent to that factory, and we had three Germans that were in charge of our section. And they didn't pay us anything, they didn't give us any food. So what did he worry about? I kept the place very clean. They liked me very much.

We stayed over there for about four months when the war really-- when the United States started bombing Germany very hard. Germany used to have machine shops on the front line and the Pullman. So if a tank broke down or something else, they could fix it right away, not bring it back.

But when the trains got a little bit damaged, they brought them in to our place. And we fixed them. And the soldiers had to wait till we fixed them and they send them back to the front line. So the fella that was in charge, the SS of our section, his name was Fox-- came in and he said, here's a number for me, Pullman. You go out and see what you have to do, because we're going to make another shift. Plus, so many-- the war was really been in progress at that time.

And I didn't know too much, but I knew how to write and read. And I made a plan of the Pullman and showed where the damage was. When he came in and went through everybody to ask him what they were going to do, he says, you're going to run the second shift.

And Sam, when you say Pullman, you mean the train.

The train. Sure, the trains.

The trains, yeah.

He says, you're going to run the second shift. There was nobody that's going to tell him that I can't do it. And I took the bull by the horn. I figured, listen, if I have to, I'll see what's going to happen. It doesn't make any difference.

And you have to understand that in camp it was very easy to commit suicide. Because the wires-- there were double wires in Auschwitz, and all the other camps, too, that had 400 volt in each one. Even if you got through one, you couldn't get through the other one.

And we started the second shift. And when I went out, and there were a lot of different nationalities-- Jewish Jews from different countries. And I couldn't understand their language, even indeed could they understand me. But I could see the damage, and I told them we were going to fix it. We're going to do this and this, and everything was fine.

And also, the Germans that brought in the trains always said, [GERMAN]. Don't do fast, because we don't want-- they didn't tell us that they don't want to go back on the front line back.

So they always left out some rations, and the rations that I got, I usually shared it with all my men in my group. And I didn't smoke, and I got some tobacco, too. So they were very happy, even if I didn't know too much. They didn't say anything. But I learned a lot while I was over there, because I didn't have a trade. And when I came to the United States, that's the trade that I went in. Maybe I'll tell that a little bit later on.

Sam, if you don't mind, you've told me a couple of things about your time at Gleiwitz that, quite honestly, I think show your fortitude and your ingenuity, if I could say that. For example, you came up with a scheme to get heat.

Oh, yes. Yes.

Tell us about that.

The trains were running on steam, and we didn't have any heat when we came back to the barracks. So I told every man that was my group-- and we had a little belly stove right in the middle. In the barrack, we slept 200 people in it.

And the fellow that was in charge was a German that I found out from him he killed his parents. And they didn't send him on the front line. But then he was running away one time, he got shot, and he was limping. His name was Walter.

And I told them-- I told them what I'm going to do, because the trains were heated. The engines were coal. So I told every man to take a little piece of coal about 1 inch by 1 inch when we go home, because they checked us. But you know, you have a little piece, a little piece of coal, they're not going to do.

So when we came back at night, we used to put that little coal in that little thing to keep us a little bit warmer during the night.

So every man brought one little piece of coal.

Little piece, about an inch-- about an inch by inch. And that's how we heated our thing. Because it's very cold over there in the section that we were in.

You also came up with a way to oversee the food distribution for your folks.

Yes. But that fellow, that German that was in charge of our barrack, had a Polish girlfriend in the factory. But they wouldn't let him go out of it. Only once a month, they used to go just into the [INAUDIBLE] to show me where it is. So he used to write letters to her in German, and she used to write in Polish. And I used to transfer the letters to either one and carry them from one place to the other one. So when I came home at night, I had a bowl of soup, but not from the top. It was from the bottom.

And I had two friends with me. One was from my town, and one from Regina's. And I used to share the soup. And that soup what kept us alive, that little bit more of soup that really kept us alive.

And because it was on the bottom, it maybe had a little bit of something in it.

That's right. And also, he said Sam, you're going to be in charge. We had a list. We didn't have names. We have numbers. Have you ever seen a number, especially in Auschwitz? We got to 2 numbers on the arm. And when you went in at night to get your little bit of soup, you were marked down that you got it.

And our block was about 200 people. And they put me in charge of this, but I knew every number. I didn't know their names, but I knew a number. And I never marked down even the book.

But one time I had a case in the morning that somebody stole a piece of bread. Because we had our little bread. A piece-- a pound of bread was for six people for a whole day. Here, we don't eat even a pound for six people. Maybe 12 people have been up. But we don't have anything else, and that's the only nourishment that you have till you come home at night and you get that little bit of soup. And there wasn't much in that soup either.

So then I went. So I didn't take my piece of bread, because I had the soup. But I was lying in the bed. I was sleeping on the top, on the third-- on the third on the bunk beds. On the third one was a bunk bed. It was boards and some straw on it.

And I went through, and I remembered the man that took that little piece of bread. And I was the only one that was allowed to get through at night, because you couldn't walk through in the barracks during the night.

And I went over to him. I said, listen. You're going to get away this time, but if the people find out what you did, I didn't have to do anything to him. Because if somebody, God forbid, stole somebody's portion, the rest of the people took care of them. Because this was your livelihood. This was your life. You took your bread away, you couldn't exist anymore.

Sam, you also had a situation at Gleiwitz in which you thought you were going to be hung.

Oh, yes.

Not hung, taken to the crematorium.

Taken to the crematorium. Do you mind telling us about that?

No, I don't. The engines run on water, and they have a float. But the float is made out of copper. But they used to bring in the trains to had been fixed, we used to change the floats, because they were very rusted on the outside. And they made already in those days aluminum instead of copper, because copper was [GERMAN]. It means that you couldn't use it, because it was a war material. And if they caught you with copper, they killed you.

But I knew that it was copper. I used to take those little pieces and clean them up. And I used to come home from work on sand. And because I worked in the shop, I had polishing equipment, and I made little trinkets out.

And I was caught with it, and all they did was took my number. And on Sunday, usually came home a little bit earlier. They used to take those people out, and they used to hang them or send them to the crematorium.

Now, I figured, listen, I don't have too much to lose when in the morning when we stayed for the Appell. And the SS went through with his dogs. I ran after him, and I told him it was before Christmas. And I told him that I made a gift for him for the [GERMAN] which for Christmas. And it was taken away from me.

But I says, I hate to see it, because I made it for him. I said, I don't care that they took it away. But I said, I made it for him, and I hate to see it that-- and I hate to see that he wouldn't get it.

And when I went out next morning. And we used to work 5 in a row and hold together. And I was always on the end. He knocked me on the shoulder, and I never heard any more about it. My number was taken off.

Sam, just to make sure that we all understand that, when they caught you with that trinket--

Sure.

--they just noted it. But you knew on Sunday--

Oh, absolutely.

--when the penalty came.

Absolutely. You had to wait till Sunday thinking that you were--

No, I had to wait for it.

You had to wait.

But this was in the middle of the week, and I figured, listen, I don't have that much to lose. I'm going to-- I just forget.

You told him you made it for him.

That's right. You couldn't talk to him, but I was running after him.

Yeah.

And I told him, and it saved me. That's how I survived.

It saved your life.

Yes.

So through all of those efforts, you survive in Gleiwitz. And now it's late in the war. It's January 1945, and the end is coming, and closing Gleiwitz. What happened then?

There was a big board in those days going around the settlement. And that time that they took it from one factory to another one, they said, we're going to settle you to another factory. You're going to work.

They brought trains they didn't have any trains. So they called it. It was a dead march. There were about 100,000 people died just on the death march from Auschwitz going on to the next place that they wanted to take us, because they didn't have any trains. Because even if you had to stop on the road, you didn't have any food. We walked for three days and three nights almost without stopping.

And finally, on the third night, we stopped in Blechhammer. That time, it was still the subcamp, and they were still working over there. So they had the barracks that were still a little bit warm. And so we sit down over there. They didn't give us any food right away.

So this was just a stop for the night.

That was the stop for the night. But they started shelling that camp in the middle of the night, the Russians or the Americans. I don't know exactly who it was. And some barracks started burning, and they decided that they were going to take everybody out and take them outside from the camp.

Now, that night I had a dream. My mother came to me and told me Sam, don't leave this place. And I remember arguing with her. I said, we're almost free. We could see what was going on. And they woke us up. I didn't remember even the dream, but when I came to the gate to go out, the dream hit me. And I said, no, my mother told me not to go. I'm not going to go.

And I had two friends. One was a little bit younger, the other one a little bit older than I was. The one from my town said, Sam, you can see we're almost liberated. Look what's going on. He said, come with me. He said, no, I'm going out.

The other one was young, and he was very sick one time. Because I had a little bit more nourishment, so I helped him out while we were in camp. So I said, you're going to go with me.

I smacked him in his face, dragged him with me. I ran back to the camp, and there was a big hole that a shell hit in the brick wall. And I crawled out through that wall. This was slow outside, and rolled down the embankment, and we ran into the woods.

I was the only one, because a lot of people ran away, because it was impossible to keep up walking day and night without food. And if you had to stop in the middle of the road, if you had to go and personal things to do, they shot you right away, because you were behind. You couldn't go anymore.

So I found out we were in the woods for about, I don't know, 8 or 10 days, till the Russians came. And we lived on snow.

Luckily we had enough water with snow. And at nighttime, we used to go out and steal some potatoes from the farmers. And that's what we lived on, raw potatoes and on snow till we were liberated.

But they found out that from the people, we are but-- they say there were about maybe close to 400,000 people on the death march. And there's very few left-- very few.

Sam, how did you were liberated? What happened that you knew?

At nighttime, when you we figured we have to get out from place, how long can you go? We didn't have any clothes. We found some newspapers and some rags.

This is January. It's freezing cold.

January, 30 degrees below zero.

Yeah.

30 degrees below zero. But we had blankets with us. Because when we left the camp, Everybody took what blankets we had when we came to cover ourselves up. So everybody had the blankets. So this kept us a little bit warmer at night.

All of them escaped, concentrated in one place. So we used to put our bodies one to the other one. And that's how we used to warm ourselves.

[CROSS TALK]

In order to keep warm a little bit better. But we came out on the-- I don't know exactly what day, because we didn't have any watches and we didn't have any papers. And we saw a tank, and we saw some uniforms that they didn't look like the German tanks or German uniforms. So we went out, and they were the Russians.

But the Russians were not like the Americans. They didn't give you food right away. They didn't have themselves what to eat over there. And they said, [RUSSIAN]. It means go home.

Just like that.

Just like that, go home. Didn't do anything. Oh, yes. They used to go in to us with the bakery-- to the bakeries and tell them to give us a little piece of bread. And at night, we used to travel from one city to the other one, because there was no transportation. Took me about over two weeks to get back to my hometown. And I wasn't that far. I was only about 60 kilometers, which is about 30 miles inside of Germany already when I was in that camp.

But from 30 miles inside Germany, you went back to--

To Poland.

Into east central, middle of Poland.

That's right. That's right.

On foot.

On foot. On foot. But at nighttime, when we used to stop, we used to go, the Germans escaped from the Russian zone, because they were very much afraid of the Russians. And they all ran to the American zone. They could see that the war's coming already to an end.

So we used to stay in those homes at night, and in the morning, we used to get him. But we had a system. Every time

where we stopped, we put down our name and from what town we were. And that's how sometimes we find each other, because we had people going each way. Some of them went back to Germany. Some of them went to Belgium. Some of them went to France. Whole Europe was gone from Germany, all of it.

So you'd write your name so if somebody came through and said there's Sam's people.

That's right, from Kozenice, or from Poland, or from here, or from there. And that's how we found out when we came to another town with the same thing. And that's how we found. We could look at those lists, and if I looked at my town, I could see who was alive, who isn't. But it's very, very, very few from our town. Maybe after the war, and a lot of them escaped to Russia, too, during the war. And I think our total, we had over about 160 people that survived.

Out of your entire Jewish population in your town.

Yes.

But you did make it back to Kozenice.

I made it back. I made it back to Poland, that's right. And I stayed. Our house was bombed out. But my uncle's house was still there. So everybody that came into the town stayed in that house.

You know, we started to get-- we'll have to build up another life, because the Russians didn't give you anything. They didn't have it themselves. I told you once about that story.

Yes.

So we figured we can't stay in Poland anymore. Our family is gone. And the worst thing, it was all right, yet we knew we were alive. But how do you start a life when you take me away from you when you're 17. Now I'm already 22. How do you start a new life-- no parents, no family, nobody else.

And I stayed in Poland till about-- till the end of 1945. And then we went to-- I and Regina-- and I'm not going again to details. I don't have that much time here.

Just say just a wee bit about how Regina got to you.

We decided-- oh, how Regina got to me. Regina found out that I was alive before I found out that she was alive from reading those papers. She was coming. She was hanging up. She was liberated in May. I was liberated in January. But she was hanging up to a train, and somebody recognized and told her, Regina, your boyfriend is alive. She says, where is he? They told her he's in Kozenice. So she already knew that I was alive.

And she came to you?

No, no. I found out later she went to her town. She went to her town, to Radom. I was already working. My father had a friend that had a flour mill, the only flour mill in our town. And one of his daughters was alive. She lived through on Irish-- on Gentile papers. She wasn't in the camp. And we put the flour mill back in operation. So I was working within flour mill.

And then I found out that Regina's in Radom. She went back to her town. She thought maybe somebody of her family is alive. But I couldn't afford it to go even to pick her up. So I took a man from the flour mill on a horse and buggy, and sent him to her town to bring her back home.

And she came.

That's how she came. That's right. Thanks, God, she came. We have been married for 57 years, and we have nine grandchildren great. We just came back yesterday from Denver, Colorado. Our grandson graduated from college. So we

went. I figured those are the things we can do now, couldn't do it before.

And we went-- we escaped from Poland. We took some people to the camps, and we still do it. We go away every second year. We take a group of young people to Poland to the camps. And then we go with them to Israel, mostly Jewish kids. But we have some Gentile kids with us, too.

And in 1975, they still stayed in line for bread in Poland. Can you imagine, in 1975? And they blamed it on the Americans and on the Jews. They say, they're running the world. That's why you don't have any bread. It never starts up anything without the Jews, so we are the-- I don't know. We are the chosen people. That's why. Chosen for what?

And along those lines, that's really what prompted you to leave Poland--

Correct.

--after the war.

We left Poland, and the mayor in our town in Poland was a fellow that used to be my teacher until-- when I still was going to school. And he was made mayor because he was in the underground.

So I went over to him. I says, listen Peshko, I have to leave this town. I lived through the Germans, and now I have the Russians here. He said, Sam, I can give you-- in Russia, you couldn't just go on the train anytime you wanted to, like here. You had to have a special pass to go.

He said, there's going to be a plebiscite on the Czechoslovakian border. A plebiscite is to take a vote in the little community. And who has the most votes belongs to Poland or belongs to Czechoslovakia. He says, I'll give you a paper to go to Czechoslovakia.

So I came home that night, and I said, Regina, we get up tomorrow morning, but we're not going to take the train in my town, because the people knew me. There were a lot of people that worked with my parents.

We walked to the next city to a station. We got up maybe 4:00 in the morning, took a station. It was [NON-ENGLISH]. I remember the station even. And we went to the border of Czechoslovakia.

The train stopped on the border. One side was the Czechoslovakian train, the other one the Polish train. They come in and check the papers. And I had that paper. But the minute they checked my papers, I and Regina walked out, crawled underneath both of those trains. And when we saw that the agents went out from the Czechoslovakian train, we went in the Czechoslovakian train. The next morning, we wound up in Prague. Was it Pilsen or Prague the first time? It was in Prague.

We really wanted to stay over there, but they told us that you can't become a citizen of Czechoslovakia. So I figured we have to get from there away. So after a while, we decided that we went back to West Germany. And we stayed over there. I worked for the UNRRA for the United Nations Relief organization. They made our wedding over there in Germany.

And then we waited. Regina found out that she has an uncle in the United States. She didn't know where he lives, but she got very sick. When you don't have time to be sick, you know-- she wasn't sick all the time that she was in camp. But the minute she got liberated, she got sick.

So she was in the hospital. And the American doctor came, which he spoke German. And they asked. He says, what can I do for you? She said he wanted to bring a candy. She didn't want to. She was in a lot of pain.

And he said, what can I do for you? She says, I have an uncle. And she said the name, and he lives in-- and she said "Nav York" because we didn't say New York.

How do you say that again?

"Nav York."

New York.

Like the way it's written. That's the whole thing, you know-- New York.

But he understood.

Oh, yes. He was German. We spoke to him in German. So he put in a letter in the Jewish paper. But her uncle didn't read the Jewish paper. He read the Wall Street Journal.

But there was a lady in Washington DC that knew her uncle very well. He used to-- she used to work for Regina's mother in Radom, where Regina comes from. Regina's mother had a dress shop, and she used to work for her.

She called up her uncle to New York, says there's a [NON-ENGLISH], which is a niece, that is looking for you. And the first thing we got was papers to come to the United States. So also, Regina had a brother that in 1939, he went on a vacation to London that was--

Before the war.

Before the war. There was a World's Fair, and he found out what's going on. He joined the Merchant Marine. And when he came to New York, he jumped ship.

And in those days, it wasn't like our days that they let so many people in. It was very hard to get to the United States. But Regina, [INAUDIBLE], the families-- he didn't-- he slept at night. He didn't stay during the day. But when the war broke out in the United States, he went into one of the--

Recruiting--

Recruiting offices. he says, I'm here. I want to go and fight. They didn't ask him if he's a citizen or he isn't a citizen. They gave him a rifle and sent him away.

He joined the United States Army.

Yeah, he just passed away about 10 years ago. Yes, and he joined the army-- came to Germany, married even a girl over there, and then he brought her to the United States. So that's-- and we came to Germany-- to the United States in 1947. And this was the best day that ever happened to us.

Sam, I hope we can hear a little bit more about that.

Yeah.

Why don't we take just a couple of minutes. And at this point, let's see if the audience has any questions they'd like to ask of you. Please, we've got a few minutes to listen to you. You might have a couple of questions. I'm hoping you will. Anybody got a question out there? If you don't, I'll have questions. Yes, sir.

After being in the camp in Auschwitz and seeing the conditions, what did you recommend that people do now--

The people, what they do?

After [INAUDIBLE]

Yes.

Going through what you're going through now--

Yeah.

Looking at some of the conditions that's happening in the world today, what do you recommend to people?

Sam, and for the audience--

I'd like for that, if I could for the end.

OK, if--

I have written something down what I want the world to do. I'm going to read it.

Yes. In fact, the question was-- the question for Sam was that in light of what you went through in Auschwitz, how would you recommend that people do today to deal with awful conditions? I mean, is that basically it?

I think that the United States did the right way going into Iraq. Maybe they didn't have all the weapons that people say, and I'm sure they had them. Because Hitler was the same way. Hitler didn't start off that they went right into Poland or to Belgium or to France. He said, listen, if you will give me this, everything is going to be fine.

They gave him this, then the Chamberlain-- I'm sure you all know the history of the war. Every time he gave him something, he wanted a little bit more. It was never enough.

When Iraq attacked Kuwait, he wouldn't have stopped in Kuwait. He would have gone a little bit farther. And I think that Bush did those things in the right time, too. You have to stop those people. Because he kills his own people. They didn't kill only Arab. They know now how many people were killed in Iraq and the graves there.

But I have something that I especially wrote up what I hope it's called should happen. And I'll read it to you.

Sam that be [AUDIO OUT]

[INAUDIBLE] you know that--

Sam's going to close the program with a couple of words that I think really respond specifically to what you just asked, so thanks for that. We have a question back there. Did somebody raise your hand? Yes, there we go.

Sam, you said that your extended family was over 100 people.

Yes.

Did you find anyone?

Yeah, a little cousin. She lives in Belgium now, and another cousin that lived in France, but he lives now in the United States.

The question being of your large family, did you find anybody.

That's right.

Yeah. OK. Do we have any other questions? We'll go back-- gentleman back there with USA on your shirt. And then we'll come down to you, sir.

Yes. Have you been to your home and over in Poland recently?

The question is, have you been back to your home and over in Poland recently?

Yes. I and my wife go on the March of the Living. We take kids every second year. We take them to Poland, and I've taken them to the camps so they can really see what was going on. Because nowadays, there's still a lot of people who say that the Holocaust has never happened. And we take them and show them exactly where it happened. We show them what was going on. So we go back. We usually go in April.

OK, yes, sir.

After your horrible experience with the German Nazi government, it seems that you went back to Germany after the war. And I just wonder, how did you feel when you were in Germany?

The question-- yeah, the question is that after all that you experienced at the hands of the Nazis, and you went back to Germany before the United States, what did you feel by being there in Germany and around the Germans?

I might tell you something that a lot of the people very hard to understand. I don't hate anybody. I don't even hate the Germans. Not every German was a Nazi. When I was in those camps, I had some Germans that helped me. So I can't say that everybody was a bad man.

Just like in the United States, we have bad people in the United States, too, killings going on here in the United States every day. You can't hate a whole nation. It's amazing. I don't hate them.

And I'll tell you, I lived-- I was safer in Germany after the war than I was in Poland in my own country. It's hard to understand.

We have time for one more question right here.

You mentioned your children.

Yes.

I'm assuming that they grew up knowing about your stories. Are they active at all in educating today's children, or are they active at all in this purpose?

For those of you who might not be able to hear in the back, the question that's asked of Sam is, with your children, are they active in doing education about the Holocaust and about what you experienced? Is that it?

Yeah, they are very active in a lot of charitable organizations. And so are we. We just mailed some money to-- what was it, the agenda that you sent the check to? Just started a-- was it in-- you know, to South America.

Oh, yes. That's [INAUDIBLE].

That's right. Guatemala.

To Guatemala. So we do those things, not only for Jewish children-- for children of anybody.

It's time for us to begin to wrap up today's program. And I think as Sam made the point so clearly earlier that it's very hard to even begin to remotely suggest what he experienced over five years in an hour period. But I think Sam, you've given us a profound glimpse into what you experienced during the Holocaust. I wish we had more time to discuss what happened as you rebuilt your life here in the United States, because I think that's a remarkable story as well.

But before I turn back to Sam to close up the program, I'd like to remind everybody here that we have a First Person every Wednesday through August 27. We'll have a First Person program, of course, then next Wednesday, on June 18. Our First Person guest next week will be Mrs. Nesse Godin. Mrs. Godin, who is also from Poland, survived a ghetto, slave labor. She was in several-- pardon?

She's from Lithuania.

From Lithuania-- excuse me-- several concentration camps, and a death march before her liberation. And so we'd like to welcome all of you to come back next Wednesday, or any Wednesday, but next Wednesday to hear Mrs. Nesse Godin.

And with that, I'd like to turn it back to Sam for some closing thoughts. It's our tradition here at First Person that our first person has the last word.

I once had this gentleman's question, too, in this thing. This is why I didn't want say it before, because I specially wrote it up. I don't remember what I ate yesterday, but I remember what I lived through through all those years. And I forget all but the right time the last words that I wanted to say, what I feel that the world should be like.

I hope for the day even people can practice their religion of choice, that race and discrimination is no longer an issue. By the 21st century, which we have now embarked, never to experience the horrors of the century we have just left behind. May we be given the strength to build together with others a world of security, mutual respect, and peace.

Most of all, I'm thankful to the United States of America for giving us the opportunity to experience the freedom and family life that this country of ours gave to the survivors of the Holocaust and this magnificent United States Holocaust Museum, which will leave the legacy to world after we are gone that bigotry and hatred must never be part of our lives.

[APPLAUSE]