

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. Our first person today is Mr. Haim Solomon. And we shall meet him 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 during World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here in the museum. Our final First Person program for 2003 will be next Wednesday, August 27. For information about the First Person program for next year, for 2004, please check the museum's website early next year. And the museum's website address is www.ushmm.org, that's www.ushmm.org.

This 2003 season of First Person has been made possible through the generosity of the Woldenberg Foundation to whom we are grateful for sponsoring this year's First Person. Haim Solomon will share with us his first person account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Haim some questions. Before you are introduced to him, I have a couple of requests of you.

One, if possible, please stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions for Haim as he speaks. And second, please make your questions during the question and answer period as brief as you can. I will repeat your question before Haim answers it. By repeating it, that allows everybody in the room to hear the question.

But I also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition know that they are good for the balance of the afternoon. So if you're holding one for 1:30 or 1:45, please don't worry. You can still get into the permanent exhibition if you stay here through 2 o'clock.

The Holocaust was the state sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and 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 learn today, Haim was a teenager of 14 in late August of 1939, when Germany and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact, and agreed to divide Eastern Europe between them. Romanian authorities quickly ordered all the Jews in the area of Haim's village of Bivolari to move further west to the city of Iasi. In June 1941, Germany turned on the Soviets, and invaded Russia. That unleashed a vicious pogrom on the Jews of Iasi, and life was forever changed for Haim and his family.

As the Russians advanced to the West, Haim and his family moved again this time to Bucharest, where they remained until the end of World War II. In 1947, Haim embarked on a journey that would take him to Palestine, but not before he was imprisoned by the British on the Island of Cyprus. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Haim's introduction.

Haim Solomon was born November 5, 1924 in Bivolari, Romania, the youngest of five children. In our next slide, we have a map of Europe with an arrow pointing to the country of Romania. After Germany and the Soviets signed the non-aggression pact on August 23, 1939, and divided up Eastern Europe, the Soviets occupied Bessarabia, 1 kilometer from Bivolari.

The Romanian authorities, suspicious of Jewish loyalties because the close proximity of the Soviets, ordered all Jews to leave Bivolari. In our map of Romania, our first arrow points to the town of Iasi, which is where Haim and his family moved after leaving Bivolari. And our second arrow points to Bucharest, where his family moved to escape fighting and chaos that eventually erupted in the streets. They moved to Bucharest in June 1944. They remained there until the end of the war.

In the summer of 1947, as Haim, along with thousands of other Jews, made his way to Palestine by ship. The British captured the ship and took all passengers to Cyprus. In this photograph taken in Cyprus, Haim stands behind a barbed

wire fence in the camp where he was detained. Finally, on December 1948, Haim escaped the British displaced camp on Cyprus and succeeded in reaching Israel.

Haim came to the United States in 1952. Today, Haim and his wife, Malva, live here in the Washington DC area. He retired on January 1st of this year, following a 38-year career with the US Food and Drug Administration where he was a microbiologist, and is one of the world's experts on the microorganism that causes botulism. He has over 70 scientific publications under his name.

In this day of bioterrorism concerns, I have no doubt that his name is on a short list of people to call if there is a major outbreak of botulism. Malva, his wife, is a physician with the Veterans Administration. Haim and Malva have two sons. One was just awarded his PhD in microbiology this past week, and the other is a producer with a local sports talk radio show, the one that I tune to listen to Baltimore Orioles baseball games.

And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our first person, Haim Solomon. Haim, please join us.

[APPLAUSE]

Haim, thank you for joining us and your willingness to be our first person today. You described your early years before Germany and the Soviet Union signed their non-aggression pact as almost idyllic. Perhaps we could begin today with you telling us about you, your family, and your community in those years before the war began to spread and break out.

As you indicated, I was born in Bivolari, and grew up. And Bivolari is a small village on the Northeastern part of Romania. On the east side of it, about half a mile or 1 kilometer away, were the River Prut. And on the west side, the village consisted of one unpaved street about a mile long. And right in the middle of it, there was a perpendicular street going westward. We called it the Armenian Alley.

We were 200 families, about 1,000 people altogether, and a well-organized community. At the end of the Armenian Alley, the Jewish community built an elementary school, the Israel del Romana school, built a matzah factory, a communal bath, and a few other communal organizations.

That elementary school, in addition to classrooms and offices, had a big hall for meetings, and a few smaller ones for smaller groups. In the main street, all along it Jews had stores and ateliers or workshops with every conceivable occupation-- tailors, and bakers, and cobblers, anything possible.

We had a rabbi that served the entire community. We had a ritual slaughter for kosher meat. We had four synagogues. And on the ground surrounding this village were 5,000, 6,000 peasants. They had all sorts of livestock, of products of which they sold to us. But on Sundays and Mondays, they would come to the market, sell their goods, and buy from our stores.

Behind the many peasants we mentioned, was a grassy knoll, a grassy field, large enough for them to send their animals for pasture, but also good enough for us to engage in sports activities.

So Haim, if you don't mind my asking, so the village really of 200 Jewish families was in effect surrounded by an outer community made up of 6,000 or so peasants and farmers essentially.

Right.

You mentioned the Prut. That was the river that forms a border between Romania and--

Well Bessarabia, Romania having sided with the winners this time. In 1919--

The First World War.

First World War, the Versailles Treaty was given to Romania. But the population was Russian speaking. And we didn't

mix too much with them.

But you lived very close to that population?

Close, yes.

Tell us just a little bit, Haim, about your family. What was your father's business?

My father's business was yard goods. And those villages, they were nothing was ready. Anything you needed, a shirt, a coat, the pants. You bought the yard good, and took them next door to the tailor.

So you didn't go buy a shirt. You bought the cloth?

Just the cloth.

And that's what your father sold, the cloth?

Exactly.

And then go next door, and the tailor makes it.

Tailor makes it.

OK, OK.

And before the non-aggression pact was signed in 1939, you were 14 years of age. What were you doing at that time? You were still a student.

A student, I helped in the house. Everybody had to do something. This was a village with no electricity, no running water, no amenities. Unless everybody did something to support this enterprise, it would fall apart.

When Haim told me about his early childhood and having to take pails and go get water to supply the family, and no electricity, certainly the power grid that went out made me grateful that I didn't live in a village. And at any point in my life where I was without running water and electricity. So it was a hard existence. But you said it was really, all things considered, almost idyllic.

Idyllic. Really.

But all that changed so dramatically for you--

Yes, in 1939.

August 23, 1939.

Yes. The Germans and the Russians signed a non-aggression pact dividing Eastern Europe by ethnicity. The Russians bring their troops up to the Prut.

So right to that river?

Right. And that's where our loyalties were questioned, as being too friendly to the communists. And asked to move, to leave the place.

So it was the Romanian authorities that were suspicious of the community's loyalty?

Yes. So we packed up, and took what we could, and left the rest, and moved to the Iasi.

And how far away was Iasi?

50 kilometers.

That's a--

52 kilometers. That's a good distance. Was that a place that most people had been before? Was that?

Yes.

OK. Our business is dependent on communicating and purchasing or bringing goods from Iasi.

And tell us what you recall about all of a sudden, here's your family's probably been there for a very long time, and you're in the community. And then an order comes and says, pack up and move 50 kilometers away. What do you recall about that? What was that like?

There were no trucks in Bivolari. So father or brother had to go to Iasi, rent a truck, or hire a truck, to come and pack us up, both the store and the household. And we had one particular woman that helped my mother raising with us. We left her at the keys.

And so she was not Jewish. She was--

No.

So you left her the keys.

Keys, and all the geese and ducks, and things that we raised.

So essentially, you just said, here's the keys. And here's our house.

Yes.

We don't know when we'll be back.

Take it. Did you think you were going to come back?

No.

No.

No, there was no coming back.

So you get in the truck, and you got all the belongings you can take from the store and from your home. And you move to this new city of Iasi and start over again.

Yes. Absolutely. We moved into a triangular building, because it stood right at the three-street intersection. And soon enough, father and all the brothers found a store, and opened that for business. And things started settling down until June 21, 1941.

Before we come to that, Haim, I meant to ask you earlier. You were the youngest of five, five children.

Yes.

There were three boys and two girls.

Correct.

And you were the youngest. What was the approximate age range in there?

Between each succeeding one were two years.

So almost 10 years' span, the kids. So here you are 14 when you first moved to Iasi. So you've got an older brother I believe who's about 24, probably. By

Then, 20, 22, 23.

So did everybody move with the family?

Absolutely.

And you moved in together into the same household?

Yes.

You've just been suddenly disrupted. This agreement has been reached. Europe's been divided. Eastern Europe's been divided between the Germans and the Russians. What was life like for you in Iasi? What kind of existence was that? Your father, as you said, he reopens his store, and gets back into business.

Iasi it was a large city, maybe 200,000 people. But the Jewish community absorbing all the little ones like Bivolari, and all along the route with other communities, the Jewish community rose to 60,000, 70,000. And we didn't get a chance to integrate or to realize its organization, when the big pogrom, the big--

Which is the 1941 day, you started.

Yes.

Why don't you tell us about that? That was obviously an incredible day.

On June 21, under the code name of Barbarossa, Germany invaded Russia. And all along the Eastern Front, yes, became the Romanian center for the Germans to bring their troops and there to advance. June 26, the Soviet Air Force bombed the rail station in Iasi. And the Germans insisted that the Jewish communists signed or showed the Russians where to bomb, where to throw their bombs.

And so on the 28th and 29th, they initiated a vicious pogrom with the excuse of going around to the Jewish communities, Jewish houses, asking them to go to the municipal police station to get new identification cards to replace the old ones. And as they marched along in groups, they were beaten and kicked. Once they got there, Germans took over.

So the Romanians did the rounding up?

Rounding up, and brought them to that police station. The police station had a large yard surrounded stone walls. And they brought them in, and start beating them and shooting at them.

My two brothers that stayed at the store, they went along, and got there. And among the early ones, they reached the walls in the back. When shooting started, they and a few other guests, a few others in a group, jumped the wall and looked for shelter. And found a shed with firewood stacked all the way to the roof, to the ceiling. So they removed some

of the wood, crawled inside and replaced the wood and stayed there.

While several times, Germans and Romanian troops came to look for people but could not find them. Myself and father stayed home and a few other neighbors. And this triangular building had a basement or more like the catacombs, nothing like a basement. And it had many exits, five or six.

Into the basement itself?

Yes. So whenever they come to ask for us, they looked for males only. Mothers and sisters would tell them we already went there. And we went out the other exits. But we also had four or five small windows that we could look out.

So in truth, you were still down there.

Oh, yes. For a week we stayed there. And through the windows, we could see fatalities, people being hurt, some elder people, the rabbi. Frail and bend over, they beat him and kicked him, until they left him bleeding. And we saw that and a few others.

Looking out these windows of the basement.

These little windows. A few days passed and the whole thing quieted down. We started coming out. And the brothers sent one of the other fellows to notify us where they are. So mother and sister went to bring them home. They thought that would be safer with women.

And we settled back to--

Haim, in addition to the Jews that were taken from the homes, forced into that police station courtyard and killed, many others were killed in other ways.

Yes.

Say a little bit about that.

After two or three days, they stopped everything. And the people that they still had. thousands and thousands of them, they marched them to railway station, placed them in boxcars, about 200 per car maybe, cars that would normally hold 50, 60, and started the long road to nowhere, back and forth in the July heat.

With the doors locked.

With the doors locked no water. Anyone that approached with water or food to give them was shot. So they would just stop and take off the dead ones, and bring other living ones into the same condition, to leave one empty car in the back where it was. So that the cars were always full, overfilled, hot.

And they weren't taking them to a particular destination, just going back and forth, while there were all these thousands of people dying.

At the very next destination, wherever they stopped, they changed guards. And no one knew where to take them, and what to do with them.

And this pogrom lasted six, seven, eight days?

Yes.

And when all was said and done, how many were killed?

The immediate report was that 10,000, 11,000 were killed, together with the ones in the courtyard. Other reports talk about smaller numbers, some review larger.

Larger numbers. And through the remarkable circumstances you described of your brothers actually climbing out over the wall, hiding in a woodshed, plus you and your father hidden in the catacomb-like basement, all of the males in your family survived that.

Yes.

That's remarkable. Was that something that at the time could you recall if you were struck by how remarkable that was that you would all somehow survive that?

I assign it all to my father.

To your father?

Yes.

How's that?

He could see situations clearly, and instilled the sense of survival to all of us. Don't give up. Don't give in.

Did others in the building survive?

Yes.

And Haim, you said that after this week or so with you hidden in the basement, your brother's hidden in the woodshed, things settle down. Settled down, yes.

And then you settled down for actually, in some respects, quite a while.

The Germans went east to the war. Romanian troops likewise did not need any more Iasi. They were now having [NON-ENGLISH] and other train stations in Bessarabia. The advance was very fast. So yes, quieted down. And the authorities handled us a little nicer.

First, they asked us to put on yellow stars. Then they came out with asking every Jewish family to send one person for forced labor, whatever that was. Whatever they needed.

One per family.

Per family, for the others you could pay some sort of a scale and military expenses. At one of these meetings, one of captains there asked who knows anything about bookkeeping. And in my education post elementary, I took up that. And I raised my hand, and there he took me.

So you became the person who was in forced labor.

And yes, and became a bookkeeper. This captain, first of all, asked me to remove my yellow star, and drove me to a formerly Jewish hospital, presently a military one, for Romanian and German soldiers. And he was in charge of supplies, and management, and all sorts of things in that hospital.

So my job became 7:00 to 7:00. We had curfew, but he would come and pick me up in the morning, and put me in his office, bring me food, drink, and he went to sleep, or drink, or something.

He would go-- he would get drunk and fall asleep.

Oh, yes.

And you would do the work from 7:00 to 7:00?

Right, yes.

And you were the only person your family who was forced into forced labor.

To that.

What was going on with the rest of your family? Were they able to try to start their business again?

Well, yes.

They were.

For doing what I did, my ID card had a stamp, a green stamp. And theirs had a brown stamp, which means they paid while I performed the obligatory labor.

But they were able to still operate a little bit of commerce during that time?

Yes.

At some point, the labor you were forced to do for this man stopped abruptly. I think you said he just stopped coming for me. This was June '41, March, April '42. He would come rarely, and then he stopped completely by the end of April or May. And with my stamped ID card, I went through the war, just showing it, actively involved in forced labor.

So how you put it to me, in a sense that you got lost in their bureaucracy. They thought you were doing forced labor. This fellow, you might explain why you think that he stopped coming to get you. And in a sense, you were left alone just because of that.

Yes. They discovered him that without me nothing is being done. So they asked him to do the work that he says he's doing, and either removed him, or punished him, or something. He stopped coming and I stopped going.

And was able to help the rest of the family after that.

Absolutely. And also pursue some sort of education. All Jewish were thrown out of public schools. So we had a Jewish high school, but it wasn't accredited. And you could attend, I mean present yourself for examinations, but not attend.

And so you're trying to still get some of your education.

Something, yes.

Keep up with it a little bit. And this continued, this living there in Iasi continued actually for several years?

Yes.

It continued really up until the end of the war.

Before the war, 1944.

Excuse me. Before the war, then you went to Bucharest.

Oh yes, early in '44. The Russian advance pushed all the way to the Prut. That is 50 kilometers from Iasi. And suddenly stopped for a long, long time. The Romanians expected to get ready for occupying Iasi, and fighting a street to street occupation. But probably it didn't come. But when we realized or heard about this preparation for intensive battles in the city, we decided to move to Bucharest.

And--

About 500 kilometers.

500 kilometers?

So tell us-- so here, the Russian army is stopped at the river Prut. You're expecting a battle in the streets.

Yes.

So the family picks up lock, stock, and barrel again, and moves.

Again, this time. In Iasi, they had trucks, not taxis, but smaller cars that could transfer the family. But we boys went with the trucks.

And moved everything, the store.

Yes.

As well as your personal items.

Correct.

And moved to Bucharest.

Bucharest.

Did others move to Bucharest with you, or was that something that a few families did?

Lots of families. The main roads were traveled by retreating Germans and deserting Romanians, so they were not safe. And we had to travel by all the remote roads. And it was safer to organize a group of families.

Almost like a convoy of trucks.

A convoy, yes.

And so you get to Bucharest. And it's 1944, spring of 1944, June of 1944, I think.

Yes.

And you start over again.

The parents, yes, start all over again. And in time, my sister got married, and the brother-in-law was of likewise occupation. And we get to Bucharest. And it's 1944. The war has not ended. But the winds are blowing in the right direction.

We are now personally now allowed to attend school. By now, I had four classes, and I needed four more. And the new rules were that likewise, you present yourself for examinations, but you could take as many classes as you can. So in 2 and 1/2 years, I finished high school.

OK.

The parents and the businesses, very soon the Russians arrived in January, February 1945.

So they crossed the Prut and then--

Crossed the Prut, bypassed Iasi, nothing happened there. But they arrived to Bucharest. And everybody was happy to see them.

So they didn't have to conquer Bucharest.

No.

The Germans had fled by that point?

Yes.

So what was it like to be liberated by the Russians?

Fool's paradise.

Fool's paradise.

Yeah. Just they were smiling and embracing you, but whenever they could, they would grab you, and kick you, and beat you. And we tried to avoid them.

Tell, if you don't mind sharing with our audience, what you told me about their fondness for watches.

Oh, yes. We all learned an expression. [RUSSIAN] What time is it? And when you told them, even in Russian, they wouldn't understand. Only if you show it. So the minute you showed him, gone was the watch. And he puts it on his hand. And we see that he has lots of watches. And he has others in his pockets. And they never had a watch.

One of them, some of them explained that the basis of communism is to so reduce you that you don't know what time it is, don't know what day it is, don't know where you are. So this at least gave him a sense of individualism, power.

By being able to know what time it is.

Yes.

Many times.

He knew many times.

Many times.

Then so this you were liberated in somewhere around March of 1944. And of course, the war ends-- I'm sorry '45. And the war ends in May of '45. And you're with your family, all intact in Bucharest. Well, what happened once the war was over? What did your family do then?

The Russians opened the prisons, and released all the communists. And one of them became prime minister. And very cleverly, he encouraged the Jewish merchants to engage in commerce. He also asked to have every minority group to be represented in the government and the parliament. And we were represented and guided by Rabbi Safran.

So a rabbi was actually-- became part of the parliament?

Yes, and he guided, and protected us, but always advised to pack up and move. Go to Israel, Palestine at that time.

And so that's what you were planning to do.

That's what I was planning to do. But all throughout this period, you had a question of surviving and advancing scholastically. So by '47, in May I finished and received a baccalaureate of high school. And now, I'm free to go.

But you were intent on finishing that education.

Absolutely.

Now you finished it, and you're free to go. So tell us about that.

June or July of '47, arrangements started for a large massive emigration. The Russians and the communists were very encouraging of it, because it would embarrass the British that were still occupying Palestine. So by, during this time, they brought in people from all the other countries, neighboring countries.

And they bought these two huge ships, Pan York and Pan Crescent. They sailed under the Panamanian flag. And these two particular ships that transported usually fruits we're well aerated. They had the best system of aeration. So they fixed the hulls of these ships with shelves or maybe half a meter high, for two people that could not stand up or sit, but only lie in them.

Traveled at night, I mean during the day nobody could go, only 10 or 15 people could go out.

Up on the deck. So you're all down in the hull of the ship?

All down in the hull.

And there's a lot of you.

7,500.

7,500 in the hull of the ship that had carried fruit before?

Right.

OK.

We started out from Bucharest in trains, again with boxcars. The battle or the problem was to avoid British spies that wanted to know where, and how, and why we were going. They didn't want. And indeed, the British foreign minister threatened all those countries that were supporting this exodus.

We traveled by train to a port in Bulgaria called Burgas. About 12, 15 hours trip. There the ships waiting for us. Even though they were prepared in Constanza, in the Romanian port, they waited for us in Burgas. And there we boarded, started out across the Marmara Sea, the Aegean. And the minute we got into the Mediterranean, the British started closing in on us.

British ships started closing in?

Yes. Because of the huge, large number of people, the instructions were to not put up any resistance, but to follow their instructions. And their instructions were to come aboard, after they agreed to some conditions I couldn't recall, which was not to punish the crew, a few other conditions. And ordered the ships and took us straight to Cyprus instead of

Palestine.

Both ships?

Both ships. The one I was in, they emptied at the Port of Cyprus called Famagusta. And there the British had camps that they used for German prisoners during the war. At this time, they cleaned them up a little, but they were still afraid that problems may arise. So they divided the camps into six to eight complets, divided, separated by barbed wire and steps going up, and across, and down to the next camp.

So here you are, taken to Cyprus. And in turn now in these camps, where you're prisoners. From the get go, though, your intent was to get out of there.

Oh, yes.

And you tried several times. Tell us about your attempts to, finally succeeding of course. But tell us about your attempts to escape these camps on this Island.

In Cyprus when we arrived, we joined the Haganah. And they divided our days into three activities-- sports, study, and resistance, or plans for escape.

The Haganah divided your day.

Yes.

Not the British guards.

No, no, not the British guards. The camps were surrounded by a double fence of wire, barbed wire. And in between the fences, they had these concertina rolls of barbed wire. And every 100 yards they had guard posts with lights and so on.

Inside, we lived in tents, and a few larger tents were devoted to meetings. But we used them for paramilitary training.

Right under the British authorities noses, there you are.

Well, the nice part was that they would bring in the morning supplies, food. But that's about all. They left, and locked up, and left us alone.

You even told me that you, under the cover of all of that, people smuggled in weapon parts, and you learn how to assemble and disassemble guns, and do all of that.

Right, yes.

Right under their noses. And tell us some, Haim, about as you all plotted and planned your escapes, you each had specialties. And--

Yes.

Tell us about your specialty.

My specialty was to get padded with heavy clothes, and once we opened the first fence, crawl into these rolls of wire.

Your job was to crawl into the rolls of wire.

Into it, because once you split it, it starts running. But if two people in the sides crawl into it. It will stay there, and you move it for others to pass through. Instructions were that once they're outside, they crawl some distance. Then get up

and run to the road, about 500 yards away. There lie in the grass and wait, at 1 o'clock or 2 o'clock at night, a truck would stop, turn off the lights, come out and whistle some Israeli tune. And everybody runs into the truck.

The truck would drive us to a warehouse in an orange grove, where we would be locked up for the day. Only at night go out and roam among the oranges. An Israeli fishermen would come to fish in Turkish waters. And with signals and prearrangements, the same trucker would bring us to a place where we would be boarded on this fishing boat.

This was amazing organization.

Yes.

I mean just all the steps that they planned.

Because the British allowed from Israel, to bring to us, or send to us, or allowed us to bring doctors, nurses, and teachers. And all these teachers were actually Haganah people that could arrange with the Greeks. The Cyprus is a Turkish or a Greek Island. And the Greeks labored for the cleaning of the camps, and the diggings, and all sorts of manual labor they did.

So with these Greeks, we could make all sorts of arrangements.

So the math teacher would do the arithmetic lesson, and then afterwards say now that we're done with arithmetic, let's talk about how to keep concertina wire intact while you're escaping.

Well, when my turn came, and I decided that we tied up the concertina. And I told my partner that I will tie up the outside, from the outside, the outer fence. And I did and crawled out. And whatever delayed us, I'm not sure. But the truck came and left, and we couldn't find it. We had additional instructions to find shelter during the day and at night come back to the same spot.

And Cyprus is full of grottos, deep stonewalled grottos. So we found this grotto.

Like caves?

Caves, large indentations.

Indentations in the earth.

And there we were 10 or 11, waiting for the dark.

You're hiding in this grotto?

Yes. And British patrols come along from one place to another. But like all Brits, they like soccer, and they kick a can, as a soccer ball. And they can lands right among us.

It falls into the fissure you're in.

Yes.

They come to look for it, and found us. They were three. We were 11, but we didn't put up any fights. We went along with them. And they took us to their post for interrogation. With a few slaps, and a few kicks, and a few beatings all they want to know is who organizes us and how we do it, and why we do it. And when we do it. And then drop us out, half naked, into a waiting room to see what to do with us.

In my case, when I woke, I started singing. And the British officer liked that. You bloody so-and-so. You love life, he said. I like you. And I told him, love life is no big deal. Life loves me, and keeps me for some purpose.

So he hurried up, and dressed us up, and took us to the other camps. Our ship landed in Famagusta, which was the summer camp. And we were on the Mediterranean. So once a week, they opened the gate for us to swim. But further inland was the winter camp. And that final punishment was to transfer us from one camp to the next.

So you try to escape from this one. They'll take you to another one.

Right. They did that.

And--

So we boarded that little ship, [NON-ENGLISH], and took us to Palestine. The British though, Israel was independent already in '48. They still controlled the port, and still ran interdiction of immigration.

So the fishermen knew where to try. [NON-ENGLISH], he tried north of Haifa, tried south of Haifa. Finally, he found a place in Netanya to unload us.

And dropped you off there.

Yes.

And you were liberated.

We were liberated.

You were free.

And buses were waiting and taking us to a military induction place.

Where you'd been preparing for, for months before in Cyprus.

Yes.

Haim, if you don't mind at some-- I think this would be a good time for us to turn to our audience to see if they have some questions. Of course, what lies ahead for Haim is life in Israel, until 1952. And then a move to the United States, and starting a new life at that time, and one that he stayed here, and hasn't had to move in a very long time. So with that, I'd like to ask you if you have some questions you'd like to ask Haim.

Yes, sir?

It sounds like at least the area of Romania that you are in, didn't have deportation to the camps, was that true in the rest of Romania? And if so, why the Romanians couldn't avoid that fate?

The question is, it sounds as though the part of Romania that you were in did not have the deportations to the concentration camps and the death camps. And was that true in other parts of Romania? And why was that the circumstance?

Oh, great question. Lots of those people where I was assigned to that hospital, others were sent further east. Some of them never came back.

The people that went into forced labor?

Yes.

Yes.

Like the little pogrom, and yes, they had others like this. And instead of putting them in a train and running them up and down, they were, again, sent to East to Transnistria. To the effect that at the end of the war, a population of 800,000 became 400,000. 400,000 Jews disappeared, whether in Romania itself, or taken to Transnistria.

OK. Do we have some other questions? Yes, sir back there.

You mentioned that the conditions of [INAUDIBLE] before the war and before the Germans invaded [INAUDIBLE]. Could you tell us a little bit about your relationship to local non-Jewish population and [INAUDIBLE] society. And did it surprise you that they didn't come to your help? Or if they did come to your help?

The question, if I can summarize it, is when you described those early years before the war began, and the Soviet-German non-aggression pact as being somewhat idyllic, could you say a little bit more about that, what the relationship was like with the non-Jewish population? And did it surprise you that they did not come to your help when things turned bad, or did they is the question you're asking.

On a personal basis, I had non-Jewish friends in my childhood and later on. We interacted. We had soccer games one against the other. They're joking friendship was to corner us, and surround us, and place us in a place where we couldn't go home. Parents knew if we didn't return, where to go and how to find us.

Later on, in the larger cities, particularly that Iasi, was a very Jewish city, but also highly anti-Semitic. All the students and all their teachers were having all sorts of programs that we tried to avoid. And they engaged in some sort of low-grade rioting and looting. And late to come, police to restore order.

Haim, if I remember right, you told me that Iasi was the center of a very nasty fascist organization.

Oh, yes.

Called the Iron--

Professor Cuza and Goga formed the Iron Guard, the legionnaire, like the Brownshirts. And they were the ones to start all the fights and riots.

OK. We have time for-- yes, sir?

You mentioned in the biography, you moved with a brother in Michigan. And what about the rest of your family? Did they go with you to Israel? Did they disperse differently from Bucharest after the war?

The question is that the biography describes that when Haim went to Michigan, Detroit, his brother was there. And the question is, what about the rest of your family. Did they go to Israel with you? Did they stay in Bucharest? What became of the rest of your family?

They were expecting the Russians to go back, and all the good times to return. And I was of the opposite conviction. And that was my idea that if I go, they will come. And indeed, I left in '47. I arrived in Israel in '48. They came in 1951.

They realized it's not going to get any better. And this time, the Romanian communist governments started to impose conditions that they were difficult times coming.

Haim, you did have one brother, however, who ended up staying in Romania until 1961 before he got out.

Yes.

Yeah. OK. I think that's probably our time for questions. So first, I want to thank Haim for being here, as our first

person. We're going to come back to Haim in just a moment. But before we do, one, I want to thank all of you for being here. Appreciate you being part of our program. I'd like to let you know that our final first person of the year will be next Wednesday at 1 o'clock, the 27th of August. And our first person next week will be Mr. David Bayer, who is from Poland.

Mr. Bayer survived a ghetto, Auschwitz-Birkenau, labor camps, and a death march. I hope you can join us next week if you're in town. And I hope that you can make it. But I'm also pleased to let that the museum will begin a special monthly version of the first person program beginning in September. That's being offered, and being offered in conjunction with the museum's new upcoming exhibit, "Hidden Children in the Holocaust." And each of the first persons during the special program will be individuals who were hidden children. And our first program in that series is Thursday, September 18, at 1 o'clock. And it'll be right here in this theater.

And the first speaker in the series will be Gabriel Mandel, who was rescued in 1943 by a family of Muslims. It's our tradition here at First Person that our first person has the last word. And with that, I'd like to turn it back to Haim Solomon to offer his closing thoughts as we end this program.

I first want to thank you for gently awaking our memories. I want to thank Marty Goldman who patiently waited for my retirement, and got me here. I want to thank the audience. I'm amazed. I work upstairs in the archives translating from Romanian into English. Every morning I come at 9 o'clock, and see people lining up to wait for the 10 o'clock opening. I'm fascinated and excited.

This is not just a museum. It's a university, for young and old where it teaches the abysmal depth of a civilized country like Germany could descend, a country of musicians, and writers, and artists.

But as a museum, this beautiful national mall of ours celebrates museums dedicated to human achievement and the arts, science, history, democracy. Whereas this museum is about evil and cruelty and sadism. But by uncovering it and displaying it, we are reasserting our belief in the dignity of men and sanctity of life, and the blessing of liberty as we all say together, never, never again. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]