

Good afternoon. My name is Teresa Pollin. I'm one of the curators at the collections division of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Welcome to our First Person program.

This program originally was supposed to take place about two weeks ago but, due to the Isabelle hurricane, was canceled.

This year's program has been generously funded by William Goldring and Woldenberg Foundation. First Person is a public program, that takes place throughout the season, at 1:00 PM, here, in the Rubenstein Auditorium. This one-hour program features the experience of a Holocaust survivor. Within that time, we will have a question and answer period at the end.

In honor of the survivor, we ask you that you stay for the entire program. Any passes for the permanent exhibition will be honored, on or after the hour printed on your pass. So if you have a pass for 1:30, your pass is still going to be good when this program concludes.

Photography is not permitted during the program. And we ask you that you turn off all of your cell phones and pagers. Your response is very important to us. So we ask that you fill out the response form, you received when you came in, and return it to the attendant when you exit.

Our speaker this afternoon is Mr. Gavra Mandil. To give you an historical context for his experience, we have prepared a brief introduction.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- The Holocaust was the state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry, by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims. Six 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.

Gavra Mandil was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1936. The elder of two children and the only son of Moshe and Gabriela Mandil. Two years after Gavra's birth, the Mandil family moved to the Yugoslav town of Novi Sad. Moshe opened a photography studio. Gavra, a photogenic child, was often a model in advertisements for his father's shop.

Axis forces invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941. And the occupying forces partitioned the country. The Mandils fled south to Italian-occupied Kosovo, where they and several other Jewish families were interned for 10 months. After Moshe befriended prison officials, the family was transferred to Italian-occupied Albania. They lived there in relative safety until the fall of 1943.

Moshe found work in a photography studio in Tirana, the capital of Albania. There, he befriended Refik Veseli, an apprentice at the studio. As the danger increased for Jewish refugees in Albania, Refik convinced his parents to hide the Mandils, in their home, in the village of Kruje

Gavra and his sister, Irena, were able to pass as villagers, but their parents had to remain in hiding. The Mandils managed to evade capture from 1943 through the end of World War II.

[END PLAYBACK]

Mr Gavra Mandil came especially, for the opening of this exhibition and for this program, from Israel. Please give him a warm welcome.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. Ka-ha. This is what they told me to do to check.

[LAUGHTER]

A little bit on a personal note, Gavra and I know each other for many, many years. We worked together, in Israel, in Jerusalem. And as part of our work, we traveled a few times to different conferences. And one of the times, we went to Koeln, in Germany, for a big photographers' convention.

And as Israelis sometimes do, we crossed the street, on the red light, not paying attention. And the policeman yelled, halt! And Gavra stood, in the middle of the road, with his hands up. And everybody was red in their faces. And everybody knew what was going on. Do you remember that, Gavra.

Of course.

From that moment on, it was clear to me that Gavra not only is a fantastic photographer and a wonderful colleague but has a story behind him. So Gavra, why don't you tell us about the three generations of photographers in your family?

Yes. First of all, I would like to thank you all for coming. And I hope that you will find, at the end of this hour, that it was worthwhile coming to this program. And I want, also, to take this opportunity-- excuse me, it's not according to the protocol-- but to take this opportunity to thank the Holocaust Museum. This--

[INAUDIBLE]

To thank the Holocaust Museum for having me over, from Israel, for this program and for the exhibition. I thank the museum very much.

Now, to your question, I couldn't start without saying these two sentences. My grandfather, Gavra Confino, after whom I am named, was a royal photographer, a court photographer, in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in the late '20s, early '30s of the previous century. And my father, a young photographer, came from Nis to the capital Belgrade, in the early '30s, as a young photographer. His name was Moshe Mandil.

In time Moshe became the son-in-law of Gavra Confino, because he married Gavra Confino's daughter, for his wife, my mother. And the combination between Gavra Confino, the photographer, and Moshe Mandil, the photographer, was Gavra Mandil, the photographer, who is me.

[LAUGHTER]

So my father was a young photographer, who introduced some new methods in work, in photography. For example, my grandfather was still photographing, in a daylight studio, with daylight. My father couldn't afford a studio with daylight, so he brought artificial light, lamps into his studio. And he was one of the first who started using artificial light in the studio, in Belgrade and in Yugoslavia, generally. And today, artificial light in the studio-- today studio flashes is a common thing.

My grandfather was photographing 1820 negatives, plates, glass plates. And my father, again, because he couldn't afford a big camera, started photographing in studio with Leica 35 millimeter, which, again, was sort of pioneering in the profession, one of the first professional photographers who introduced 35 millimeter into photography.

Just one more thing, not in vain, I received a medal from the European Association of Professional Photographers as one of five photographers pronounced as photographer of the century, because I was representing a family of photographers, who was active in photography throughout the whole century-- my grandfather at the beginning, my father in the middle of the century, and I have been a professional photographer, in Israel, at the end of the century. Today, I have got a school of photography. And I train young photographers in Israel.

So now we're going back to the time when you were six years old and your father used you and your sister as his models

for advertising of his own studio. And in--

And what happened?

--March 1941, the Germans are coming in.

Yes. Though the war started in Europe in '39, we, in Yugoslavia, still were quite safe, felt safe, in '40, that it won't happen to us. What happened in the rest of Europe will not happen to us.

So before Christmas, in 1940, a few months before Christmas, my father put a Christmas tree and photographed my sister and me, in front of the Christmas tree, in order to make an advertisement, for his studio, to put in his windows, show windows, the big enlargements, big photographs of my sister and me, just before Christmas, so that when the clients see the photos, in the windows, they will come and ask for the same kind of pictures.

This particular picture-- excuse me. The war in Yugoslavia arrived on the 6th of April 1941. After a certain time of different regulations, by the Germans, in Yugoslavia, and different regulations for the Jews, that they have to report here and there, there was an announcement that each family has to report, on a certain day, a certain time, in the Belgrade fairgrounds, in order to be taken to labor in Germany. And when the war is over-- to help the German industry work. And when the war is over, we shall be released and come back.

I don't know how. And it will never be possible to explain. My father had the instinct that this is a one-way ticket. This is only one way. Whoever goes-- excuse me. This will happen during this talk several times.

Whoever goes on this journey will never come back again. So he decided, and with the help of my mother's and father's friends, Christian friends in Belgrade, to get false documents. Mandil became Mandic. Moshe became Mirko. Gavra is a common Yugoslav name, even among non-Jews. I remain Gavra. So everything was-- Irena, of course, the same, my sister.

And we fled from Belgrade. And my father wanted the direction of south as far as possible from the German-occupied territories. As it was shown in the film, Yugoslavia was divided between republics. And each republic of Yugoslavia, each part of Yugoslavia has been given to a different ally. Macedonia was given to Bulgaria. Vojvodina was given to the Hungarians. And Kosovo was given to the Italians.

So my father wanted to get out of the German-ruled part of Yugoslavia and get to the Italian territory, to Kosovo. And on the border, between the German part and the Italian part, there was in [NON-ENGLISH], so a little town, the post where everybody was checked, when passing the border.

All our documents were collected. And we were sitting and waiting in the train. All of a sudden, loudspeaker goes, Mandic family, come off the train and get into the office of the--

Train station manager.

--of the train station manager. And my mother says, they are calling us. Let's go, quickly. So our parents took my sister and me, by hand, and we went off. And there was an SS officer, who-- well, to me it sounded shouting, but speaking very loud. You are Jews. Du bist Jude. So my father says, how come? We are not Jews. Here is the documents. We are Christians. And he said, no, but your father's name is David. And David is a Jewish name. You must be Jewish, because you are--

And then my mother spoke better German than my father. And she started having a conversation with the officer. David is also a Christian name. It's not necessarily a Jewish name. And in these few seconds, my father had the strength to concentrate. And he remembered that picture in front of the Christmas tree.

So he said, where is the picture in front of the Christmas tree? And my mother pulled it [AUDIO OUT] purse. And she said and [AUDIO OUT] showed the German officer. You see, we are Christians. Here are the two children. And they

are standing in front of a Christmas tree. We celebrate Christmas. We are Christians. And my little sister-- I was five. My sister was three. She pulled his arm and said, you see, this is me. And this is my brother, Iki. And she called me, Iki, at that time. And this is my brother, Iki. And she was so sweet.

And he turned very, sort of angry and said, get out of here and wait out. And we went out of the office and waited, in front, in the yard, and waited. What is going to happen? And I probably wouldn't have noticed something, that my parents made an effort and made a point for us not to see. They were turning our faces in a different direction.

And I was peeping. From what are they distracting our attention? And I looked there. I didn't understand then. But now I know there was a wall stained with dark stains and dark stains on the floor, on the ground. And it was a wall in front of which the Germans carried out assassinations of all those who shouldn't pass the border-- Jews, communists, and partisans, and such people. As I say, I wouldn't have taken notice of that wall if my parents didn't make special efforts to hide it from us. May I?

Several minutes later, the loudspeaker again went on, Mandil-- no, Mandic family get on the train. And we kept on standing. Mandic family get on the train. Oh, it's us. Let's go, quickly. And we climbed, quickly, on the train. And thank goodness, ch, ch, ch, the train started, easily pulling out the station. And again, a whistle, [WHISTLES] the train stops. What's happened now? My parents were afraid to look. For us, a five-year-old and a three-year-old, all this didn't mean a lot. But for my parents, it must have been a terrible trauma.

And what happened now? Why are we stopping? And then we saw, on the platform, the German officer looking around. And he spotted us, where we were, in the cabin where we were. And he started marching, the German march, duck, duck, duck, with his boots. Got on the train, came quickly, duck, duck, duck, duck, to us and pulled, out of his pocket, a photograph of two blond children about the same age as my sister and me. And said, you see, these are my children. And the two children standing, also, in front of a Christmas tree, not the same pose, not the same position, but also the same idea. I think it was taken at home, not in a studio.

And my father, very--

Calmly.

--calmly responded, oh, very nice photograph. Yes. Very nice photograph. So he saluted and said, have a good journey. I don't know, until today, if he got convinced that we are really Christians or if a-- [NON-ENGLISH]

Crumb.

--a crumb of humanity rose in his heart. Maybe he didn't get convinced but seeing the children, seeing the pictures still made him let us go through.

During this time, your father showed presence of mind and initiative many, many, many times. This was the first time, during the war, that it really saved your lives, but it was not the last time.

No.

What happened in Pristina, in prison, where you were housed? And how many people were there? How many Jews were there?

We got to Pristina, which was and still is the capital of Kosovo. And there was the Jewish community, in the place, living freely under Italian--

Rule.

--rule. Under Italian rule, very freely. And I don't know, maybe this is one of the unexplained things. My parents were so naive, and so believing and trusting, that they immediately discovered we are Jewish refugees from Belgrade. We

fled from the Germans, and we came here, as if they've reached the absolute safety. So it didn't pass a long time. After a few weeks, it was announced that all the Jews who got from the north to Kosovo should concentrate in a-- thank you-- school. Because the schools were on the summer vacation. So each few families got a classroom. And we were located there.

But again, it didn't take much time to realize that this is not the place to keep families, children, or elderly people, and so on. So they transferred us all, from that school, to the local prison of Pristina, where there were criminals, thieves, I don't know, different criminals. They squeezed the criminal in one part and had the rest of the prison for the Jews.

We were there, gathered, all the refugees from Belgrade, about 120, 130 people into this prison in Pristina. And on the day when we got there, marching through the streets from the school to the prison, there was waiting for us an Italian command. And we gathered in the yard of the prison. And we were all against the walls. And there was a table, a desk in the middle. And the Italian commander said, now, please make a line here. We want to register everybody who is here. We want to make a list of the inhabitants.

Nobody moves. Everybody is stuck to the wall. OK, start. Get off. Start making a line. Nobody moves. And then a big shout, if you don't move now, I shall start commanding who will come and who. So my father took the hands of me, my sister, and with my mother, and we were the first on the list of the prisoners. Number one, Moshe Mandil-- the Jewish names-- Moshe Mandil, Ela Mandil, my mother, Gavra Mandil, me, Irena Mandil.

Number five was already somebody else. After he showed courage to start being listed, people stood in line behind him. Why? It's very important-- sorry? It's very important, the fact that we were the first four names on the list. Because, later, I shall get to a point where it played a very, very important role.

Anyway, in the prison, we lived, like for us, the children, it was not a terrible time. We made a [NON-ENGLISH]? A

A group.

--a group of soldiers. Made ourselves guns from sticks and broomsticks, and we were playing war all the time. What was happening around us, we were playing there. I was the youngest soldier in the group. But my sister was accepted, too, so I wasn't the youngest. I was one but youngest.

Tell us about the friendship between your father and the Italian guards.

My father, well, he had a good sense of communication with people, anyway, even among his friends before the war. But there, one day, he saw the Italian soldiers, the Italian guards who guarded us, taking pictures of one another. So this one gets the camera, takes a picture of that one. This one takes the camera.

So my father said, let me do your picture of the two of you. You don't have to miss anybody from the pictures. Get together, I shall take. And he posed them in different war positions, doing this and that and really looking like heroes, though they were just guarding us, in the prison, as if they are in the front line. And they were very, very happy and satisfied with the photographs.

The commander of the prison saw the photographs. Can you take me, my picture, in my office, please? And my father started getting business orders, I mean, for no money.

[LAUGHTER]

But the work-- started working as a photographer in the prison.

This story is absolutely fascinating. I just want to--

Yeah, OK.

--let you and me know that we have about 15 minutes and a lot of time to cover and a lot of things that happened.

I get now to the next point.

[LAUGHTER]

They--

He cannot be controlled.

[LAUGHTER]

Dangerous. They asked him, well, do you want more food? No. I will not have more food than the other friends here. Do you want-- I don't know what they offered him. So he said, if you want to do something for me, I want to get out of here and transfer us to Italia? What do you mean, us? The whole bunch. You are Italians. You are commander of this prison. So you have the authority to take us out of this prison and transfer us to Italy. Oh, don't be crazy. We can't do that.

The following day, probably because the Italians complained to the Germans, their bosses, that it's too crowded for 120, 130 people in such a small place. We were about three or four families, in each cell, in each room. And they said, let us spread. Take the--

Prisoners, the criminals.

--criminals out of the prison, make more room for the Jews. The following day came the Germans and said, we heard that you don't have enough room, that you feel too crowded. We shall make some more room for you. The first 60 on the list, we take out from here. And we understood what they mean, we take out of here.

We thought, at the time, that they are taking-- they will take the first 60 to Germany. And then, God forbid, what is going to happen? And then they asked for the list of the inhabitants. Remember, we were the first four on that list.

Nobody knows, until today, why they started reading the names from number five onwards. The 60 people, from number five onwards. There were rumors. There were rumors, later, that the commander of the prison took off the four first names from the list.

So first, 60 were taken out. And we heard, several days later, that they were all killed, in a nearby forest, near Pristina. They even didn't bother to bring them to Germany. They disposed of them, in a nearby forest, near Pristina. Then-- now I carry on, you see. Teresa is--

I wish we had two hours.

OK. Then the Italians realized that they want to do something, in order to protect us, in order to help us. So what they could do was-- but the idea, the original idea came from my father's request to transfer us to Italy. But they couldn't transfer us to Italy. So they transferred us to Albania, which was also under Italian rule, under Italian control, to be as far as possible from the Germans.

So they told my father, because they saw, in him, some kind of representative of a leader in the prison. They told him, get a few people who can drive lorries.

Trucks.

Trucks. Lorries in England, trucks in America. We shall get some truck. And we shall get some trucks that are out of use, some military trucks, Italian military trucks that are out of use-- can't be used anymore, and get people who can drive a truck. And prepare yourself for a journey, from Kosovo, to Albania. This is a few days' journey in serpentine

hills and so on, with cars that were already out of use.

But anyway, each of these trucks was referred, was-- [NON-ENGLISH] was sent to a different city in Albania. We were on a truck, with 18 other people, sent to Kavaja. Others were sent to different, other cities in Albania. We were sent to Kavaja, a relatively middle-sized city, not too small, not big, as Tirana was then. And off we went and got to Albania.

I start Albania?

I think so. Since we have about 10 minutes left, and it's very important to talk about Refik. Maybe we will-- just, if you could tell, in a few words about the school in Kavaja.

I shall.

And then Tirana.

Are you in a hurry, anybody?

[LAUGHTER]

But the wedding is going to be here.

The what?

The wedding starts at 2:00 here.

Oh.

We have to go.

Oh.

[LAUGHTER]

We got to Kavaja and lived. Ah, first of all, the welcome in Albania? This is something that is difficult to describe in words. After coming from the hell of Yugoslavia-- actually, the whole Europe, we felt as if we have come to paradise, in Albania, a poor country, a very simple people. Most of them, villagers, agriculturals, not very, very educated and civilized, simple people but all hearted. And they came towards us, with food, with blankets, with whatever they thought might be useful to us. And with open hands and open hearts, welcomed us in every city that we got.

And as I said, we got to Kavaja. We rented for money. My father was doing work. So he was earning money. But other Jewish families, who didn't have the luck of working and earning money, had always hidden somewhere a golden Napoleon or some jewelry, and were paying, in this way, for the rent of a five-room flat. We hired a five-room flat, one family in each of the rooms.

We were the biggest family with two children. We got the room with a balcony. All the others had the simple rooms, because these were couples or couples with one child. My father, it didn't take him a day, he already hang on the balcony a huge linen-- [NON-ENGLISH]

Sign. A sign.

--a sign. [NON-ENGLISH]?

Sheet.

A sheet. A huge sheet, on which he wrote, "Photo," and hang on the balcony. [LAUGHTER] And immediately, Albanians started climbing up. It was on the first floor. Climbing up to take pictures. And my father still didn't have film. So he did without the film. He got, in advance, something and ran quickly to buy films. And said, listen, you have closed your eyes on the photo. I have to--

[LAUGHTER]

--I have to photograph you again.

[LAUGHTER]

So then he did the proper photograph with the film in it.

And then you went to school.

And then, I got to the age of 7. And I learned my first grade, first class in primary school, in Kavaja. At school, I was known as Ibrahim Mele, with Muslim documents, Muslim false documents. I even went to mosque to pray to Allah. And I learned the Muslim prayers. [ARABIC] I know it by heart until today. And I was going to the mosque with all the other children.

Then, all of a sudden, one day, we started in our first grade classes of religion. And in Albania, you have mixed religions, Muslims and Christians. So the teacher said, all the Christians stand up and make a line here. So half of the class stands up and makes a line. Now, all the Muslims stand up and make a line here. The other half of the class gets up and stands here.

And I keep sitting. I don't know what I was waiting? All the Jews get up and make a line or what?

[LAUGHTER]

So the teacher said, Ibrahim, are you dreaming? Well, go to your line. Which is your line? So I ran to the Christians, because I remembered that we left Belgrade with the Christian false documents. And then I remembered, here I go to mosque. So I ran quickly.

[LAUGHTER]

So I ran quickly to the Muslim line. Ibrahim, don't you know what you are, Christian or Muslim? Why are you so confused? No, no, no, I'm not confused. I am Muslim. That's true. And since then, there were no mistakes like this. Because it was all counted on my not concentrating or something.

A few months later, you moved to Tirana.

Now, in '43, Italia capitulated. And the Germans came to all the territories that were under Italian rule, Albania as well as all other places. And then, because the municipality, in Tirana, we had to report there as Jewish refugees. And they knew that we were Jewish and had Jewish certificates. Only at school, I was known as Muslim.

We had to run away from Kavaya. But again, what Albanians did? They destroyed all our Jewish--

Documents.

--papers, all--

Identity.

--identity cards and gave each and every one of the Jews in Albania, again, Muslim cards, Muslim identity cards.



Something that one cannot believe that, at that time, when Europe was such a hell for Jews, the Albanians acted as they did.

So we fled to Tirana. And of course, at Tirana, others dispersed into small villages. My father chose to be in the capital, in Tirana, where we shall mix among many people, among thousands of people, and probably will not be noticed. He dressed himself in national clothing, national uniform of an Albanian. My mother, as a national Albanian, with a [NON-ENGLISH]-- how do you call this?

A burqa, we all know.

A burqa. A burqa. And they went to Tirana, ahead. And they were going around the center of town. And of course, my father was looking for photographers, for a photographic studio. And they see there, Foto Lux by Neshed Ismail.

Talk into the microphone.

Foto Lux of Neshed Ismail. And they looked at one another, my mother and my father. Could that be our Neshed? Our Neshed was apprentice in my grandfather's studio, in Belgrade, when he was a boy, 17, 18 years of age. And could that be our Neshed? Well, let's walk in and see.

And they walked in. And it was our Neshed. And they embraced. He recognized them immediately, though they were sort of disguised in Albanian costume-- Moshe, Ela. And they told Neshed what is going on with us. So Neshed said, don't worry. You will stay in my flat. Neshed was still a bachelor then. Had a small flat not very far from the studio.

You will come, with your children, and stay with me in my little flat. And so we did. And my father started working in his studio. He took photographs, in his studio, on large cameras underneath a black cloth.

And many of the clients, most of the clients were German officers, who came to take pictures and send back home, to Germany, to their families, their wives. Here I am, invader, conqueror of Tirana. And my father used to take their photographs, hiding.

If they would have known that a Jew is hiding under the black cloth, wouldn't be good. There was, in Neshed's studio, a young apprentice, 16, 17 years of age, Refik Veseli, Albanian, whose parents, whose family sent, from a small village called Kruje, to the capital, to the big city, Tirana, to study a profession, to get to know. And he wanted to get into photography.

Five minutes. Five minutes.

Five minutes? Five minutes.

[LAUGHTER]

He wanted to study photography. So he came to Neshed to study from him. And Neshed told him, a better teacher than Moshe, you can't have.

When it became very, very dangerous even to stay in Tirana--