

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 fifth season of First Person, and our "first person" today is Mrs. Charlene Schiff, whom we shall meet shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust, who share with us their firsthand accounts of their own experiences associated with the Holocaust and World War II. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. Each Wednesday through August 25 we will present a new First Person program. If you go to the museum's website, at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- you will find a preview of upcoming First Person guests. This 2004 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of both the William Goldring and Woldenberg Foundation and the Helena Rubinstein Foundation, to whom we are grateful for sponsoring this year's program.

Charlene Schiff will share with us her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Charlene some questions.

Before you're introduced to Charlene I have a couple of requests of you. First, we ask that, if possible, please stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions to Charlene while she's speaking. And second, if you have questions during our question and answer period, please try to make them as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so that all in the room, including Charlene, hear it-- hears the question before Charlene responds to your question.

I'd also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition know that they're good for the balance of the afternoon. So staying through the program until 2 o'clock will still permit you plenty of time to see the exhibit.

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.

Having Charlene Schiff with us today is particularly noteworthy because, as you will hear, as a 12-year-old she went into hiding during the Holocaust. And the museum is presently featuring a remarkable exhibition, "Life in Shadows-- Hidden Children in the Holocaust." We hope you see the exhibit today if you've not already done so, or make a point to come back to see it.

What you are about to hear from Charlene Schiff is one individual's account of the Holocaust. As she will tell us, she escaped from a ghetto in Poland, crossed a river, and escaped into the forest as a young teenager, and hid those forests for a full two years before her liberation.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Charlene's introduction. And our first picture is actually a composite portrait of Charlene Schiff's family-- her mother, Fruma, her sister Tia, and her father Simcha. Charlene's European name is at the bottom of the screen.

We have a map of Europe with an arrow that points to Poland, where Charlene was born, on December 16, 1929. Our next map is of Poland, where she was one of the youngest of two daughters born to a Jewish family in the town of Horochow. And our arrow points to Horochow.

Our next picture is of the town of Horochow. In the background is the main wooden synagogue. In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and three weeks later, the Soviet Union occupied Eastern Poland, where Charlene's town was located. In 1941, Germany invaded the USSR and set up a ghetto in Horochow. When they heard rumors that the ghetto was about to be destroyed, Charlene and her mother fled. We will hear much more about this today from Charlene.

Charlene came to the United States in 1948. Later, she would marry Ed Schiff, who was in the Reserves, but was called back to active duty and assigned to Germany. Once Charlene became a US citizen, she joined Ed in Germany. She was an Army wife for 28 years.

Today Charlene and Ed live in Northern Virginia. They have one son, Steven, and two grandsons, ages 12 and 10. Ed, who retired as a colonel, was recently appointed as an honorary brigadier general, and serves as a military aide to Virginia Governor Mark Warner. Charlene has been speaking about her Holocaust experience since 1985. And I'm pleased to say that Ed is with us today. Ed, if you wouldn't mind raising your hand in the front row.

[APPLAUSE]

I would like to let you know that after today's program, the museum will be selling copies of its publication, Echoes of Memory, which features writings by survivors who participated in the museum's writing class for survivors. Charlene is a contributor to Echoes of Memory. With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our "first person," Charlene Schiff.

[APPLAUSE]

Charlene, welcome, and thank you for your willingness to serve as our "first person" today. Charlene, let's begin today with you telling us about your early life in Poland, those first 10 years before Germany invaded Poland. And I think it might be good for you to share with us what it was like for your community, for your family, and for you in those early years.

First I want to say, welcome, and thank you for coming to the First Person program. We all appreciate it very much. And again, we are grateful. Thank you.

And now to answer the first question. From my perspective, my early life was rather idyllic. I had a father-- a wonderful father, a wonderful mother, and an older sister. She was four and a half years older than I. I adored my sister, and I'm sure I was the bane of her existence, because I wanted always to imitate and to do whatever she did. And her interests and mine were not the same.

My father was a professor at the University of Lvov. He was teaching philosophy. My mother was also a teacher, but she was busy raising two young daughters, and she did not work professionally.

Our home was filled with people most of the time, because it was a very-- both my parents were very active in the community.

Our little town, Horochow, was a wonderful town to live in. I am sure that I idealize my early years, but I cannot help it. It was a wonderful place to live and to grow.

This community in Horochow was a wonderful community. And I'm often asked whether or not I saw antisemitism there. I must say, that I did not. I think, in our town, the community worked together, and the Jewish people and the rest of the community, the Christian people worked hand in hand.

And just to give you an example, my mother-- my mother and other women, Jewish women-- organized wonderful summer camps for poor children. There were summer camps for Jewish children and there were summer camps for Christian children. They had to be separate because of the kashrut, of the dietary laws that the Jewish people observed. And that's why they were separate. Then there were kitchens organized in schools to provide free lunches for poor children-- again for the Jewish children and for the Christian children.

My father tutored students to enter the university. And if they were poor, he didn't take any money, and he didn't ask if the student was Jewish or Christian.

And my parents were not the only ones who extended a bridge, and built bridges of understanding among all the people

in our town. In our home, there were recitals, poetry readings, and the door was always open, and everyone was welcome.

I received tutoring from the time I was four years old. At four years of age, I had a private tutor who would teach me, who had come every day to our home. And I had to learn how to read and write, and also a second language. And the second language was Latin.

Our life was peaceful, from my point of view. I know that there were problems, because my parents tried to immigrate to the United States. And most of my father's family was already in America. But our papers seemed to be complicated. And I remember going to the consulate a number of times. And yet, we still ended up living in Poland.

Charlene, just a little bit more about your sister. You mentioned you had recitals in your home. You described her as a musical prodigy.

Yes, my sister was a musical prodigy. She played the piano and she played the violin very, very well. As a matter of fact, my father did acquire a violin. I don't know-- it wasn't a Stradivarius, I'm sure. But it was a very expensive violin. And he presented it to her before the war started.

She was extremely talented. And that's where she and I differ, because I was not musically inclined at all. And as a matter of fact, at one time, I did a very mean-spirited thing. I don't want to go into it now. [LAUGHTER] But it was mean-spirited.

But I adored my older sister and she treated me as much with love as she could. She loved me. But I was not in her league. And to this day, I wish I could have her here to publicly apologize for being a nuisance to her.

Charlene, you've certainly described to us in your words a rather idyllic life in those years before the war. And of course, in 1939, September 1939, Germany invades Poland. Shortly after, the Soviets come into the area of Poland, where you lived. Tell us about that time under the Soviet occupation, what changed for you, and what life was like under the Soviets for the time that they were there.

Excuse me, Bill. May I? I want to add one other thing that I didn't before.

I want to tell you that my parents were civic leaders in the community, but also that my father, I found out later, after the war, was an ardent Zionist. And he helped many young people escape or make their way illegally out of Poland to what was then Palestine. I didn't know that, but I knew that there were secret meetings, and when my father was in his study, and when he closed his door, we were not allowed to disturb him.

And at that time, there were other-- there were young people with him who were planning different ways how to leave Poland and how to go to Palestine. And that is very important, and I'm very proud of that.

Thank you.

Yeah. And now, to answer what happened after the Soviets invaded, or came into Poland. Well, when the war started, it was chaotic in our area. And at that time, we were told that-- we weren't told, but later, we found out-- that Hitler and Stalin made an agreement. And they divided Poland, actually, in half. The western part of Poland became the property of Germany, and the eastern part belonged now to the Soviet Union. When the Soviets came in, they came in with a lot of fanfare and a lot of foot soldiers. And there was a lot of fanfare, I guess-- but little bloodshed.

And again, I have to judge everything from my own perspective. I know that there were many changes. And all of a sudden, there were no-- everything was-- I mean, the businesses were closed, and there were no-- there was no merchandise, there wasn't enough food, and all these kind of things.

But from my own perspective, I did not see that. My parents shielded us from these unpleasant things that were happening. And for me life, went on as usual-- well, not quite as usual, but no many-- no drastic changes. We still

stayed in our own home, my father continued with his teaching in Lvov, and my sister and I continued with school.

There was one difference. And at that time, the official language became Russian instead of Polish. But in that area of Poland, or in that area of Europe, most people are bi- or trilingual out of necessity. Borders changed so often that one has to speak more than one language. So, consequently, when the official language became Russian instead of Polish, it was no big deal. And we continued with school. And life went on almost as it was before.

But there were many changes, and I do refer to them now. But I did not see them then. All of a sudden, some people who were considered rich disappeared. Some businesses would close, and some items were in short supply. But as I said, my parents shielded us from these unpleasant things, and my life went on quite uneventful.

And then, of course, in 1941, the Germans turned on the Soviets. They came into your town. And things changed then immediately and dramatically. Tell us what happened when the Germans came into your town.

Well, yeah, when the agreement between Hitler and Stalin was broken, the Germans entered our town almost immediately. Again, there was not much bloodshed. There were tanks, and artillery, and foot soldiers. And interestingly, at that time, the local populace greeted them with flowers and cheers.

But that's when our horrible experiences-- "ours" meaning the Jewish horrible experiences-- began. Right after the Germans entered our city, the first thing-- I don't know if it was within the first day, but very shortly after they came in, they gathered all the Jews in the market square and told us that from now on they're in charge. And they started issuing decrees. Every day, there were different decrees.

But the way they started, they had a plan. The first thing they did, they burned all our synagogues-- and we had to watch. I mean, we had to gather at the square, at the market square, and watch. They burned all the synagogues. They burned all our prayer books and all our Torahs. People were not allowed to shed a tear. If you shed a tear, you were shot right on the spot.

After that, they started issuing decrees-- every day, different decrees-- for gold, for silver, for nickel, for copper, for paintings, for rugs-- Persian rugs. Anything of value, we had to part with and we had to give it to the Germans. And this went on for quite a while.

But meanwhile, everyone who was 14 years or older had to congregate early every morning in the market square. And they were marching off to slave labor. People who were working received a meager food ration. Children like me received no food at all. This went on for several weeks.

And right-- I forgot to say this-- but right in the beginning, after they burned the synagogues, and the prayer books, and the Torahs, the next thing, among between all these decrees that they were issuing daily, they went and had a roundup. Now the roundup was to get 300-- about 300 Jewish leaders, and my father among them.

I will never forget the day when they came in, and my father saw a group of Ukrainians, and maybe one or two Germans. But mostly they were the Ukrainians from our hometown. They came, and they were going around with a list, getting the people on the list.

Now this in itself, it seems very sad, because we lived in such great harmony before the war. And all of a sudden, our neighbors and former friends became our enemies. They supplied the list to the Germans of the Jewish leaders.

And my father saw this little group coming up the hill where our house stood. And they opened the front door. And my father tried to escape in the back door. But the house was surrounded, and they wouldn't even let him go back to the house to put on a jacket. My father was a very formal man, and he always wore a suit, a jacket-- I mean a suit--

Suit jacket.

--a suit jacket. And they would not allow him to go back. And we never really even said goodbye. I will never forget

that moment, and the look in his eyes. As a matter of fact, my mother turned gray overnight when my father was taken away.

And Charlene, that was the last time you saw your father?

It was the last time I saw my father, yes.

Did you know what happened to him?

At that time, no. And to tell you the truth, my mother was a wonderful person. Obviously, that's what I would think. But she was injecting hope. And she tried to feed us all these hopeful things, and all the stories, how we would react, and what we would do when Papa would come home after the war. But that was never to happen.

So your father's now gone, and it's your mother caring for you and your sister.

Yes. And at that time there were still decrees coming every day, with all sorts of crazy things. But the Germans ruled, and they had the upper hand.

And a few weeks after they entered, we were told, early in the morning-- there were-- what do you call it-- horns and announcements over the--

Loudspeakers.

--loudspeakers, yes. And we were told to gather in the market square, and that we had an hour or so. And we could bring-- take with us whatever we could carry. That's it. And this was our introduction to the ghetto.

The ghetto was built in a very poor section of town. And when we gathered in the market square, we were marched from there, guarded around so no one could escape, carrying whatever we could carry with us. And there we were assigned a space to live in the ghetto.

The ghetto was completely enclosed, barbed wire reinforcing high wooden fences. There were only two gates that were guarded 24 hours a day. And we needed a written permit to enter or exit the ghetto.

Also, at that time, we were all required to wear a yellow Star of David on the front and on the back of our clothing. Mother, sister, and I were assigned a space to live in a room with three other families. There was so little space that the adults had to build bunk beds in order to accommodate everyone. Straw served as mattresses.

And this house, I don't quite remember if it was a two-story house or a three-story house. But it held approximately 100 people. And we all shared one very primitive kitchen and one bathroom. And that was absolutely agonizing.

Also, after we went into the ghetto, there was an awful lot of commotion, an awful lot of chaos. And at that time, about 20 of us young children, who didn't get any food and who didn't work, got together, and we built a tunnel. And I'm using the word very loosely, because euphemistically we called it a tunnel. It was a hole.

But this hole was going-- it was leading from the ghetto to the outside. There was an old abandoned kiosk near the ghetto, and we made that as our exit on the outside of the ghetto. And this hole was dug by the 20 of us, or-- I think there were about 20 kids.

And we could do that because everyone was very busy with their own moving in, and getting settled, and trying to build some kind of a normal life in the ghetto. And so they didn't pay attention to us kids. And so we could do it.

This hole was camouflaged from the inside and the outside.

Charlene, when you say kiosk, you mean like an old newsstand kind of thing?

Yes, it was-- it wasn't in operation. But it was very, very good for us to have a place that still had some walls. And so that if we got out there, nobody would see us. It wouldn't be open.

You described the tunnel to me, really, as a work of art.

Well, it was. I'm very proud of it. And I shouldn't say I am proud, because I was just one of the helpers. But these kids, our kids were clever.

And hunger is such a strong motivator. And this tunnel-- this hole, tunnel-- allowed us to sneak out at times, take off our yellow star, and try to get some food, and bring back to our families.

We had a system that was very, very well organized. We took turns in getting out of the ghetto via the tunnel. And each of us had a special time and a special day.

And for a while--