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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. Our "first person" today is Mrs. Agi Geva, whom we shall meet shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust, who share with us their firsthand experiences associated with the Holocaust. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here in 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 the 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.

Agi Geva will share 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 some questions of Agi.

Before you are introduced to her, I have a couple of requests of you. If possible, please stay in your seats throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions to Agi should people be moving around during her one-hour program. And second, during the question and answer period, if you have a question-- and we sure hope you will-- please try to make your question as brief as possible. I will repeat the question so that all in the room hear it, including Agi, before she responds to your question.

I'd like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition for later this afternoon know that they are good throughout the entire afternoon. So if you stayed through our one-hour program, you're not going to miss the permanent exhibition.

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

What you are about to hear from Agi Geva is one individual's account of the Holocaust. This year marks the 60th anniversary of Germany's occupation of Hungary. 60 years ago this month, Hungarian Jews were rounded up in preparation for their forced deportation to death camps and to perform slave labor. Nearly 440,000 Jews from Hungary were deported in less than two months. Most were sent to Auschwitz.

As Agi will tell us, she and her mother and her sister were taken to Auschwitz before being sent to perform slave labor. Later, Agi would be forced on a death march before finally being liberated.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Agi's introduction. And we begin with a portrait of Agi and her sister, Zuzah, that was taken in 1934. Zuzah is Agi's younger sister, and so Agi is on the left-hand side-- your left-hand side.

Agi was born Agnes Laszlo on June 2, 1930, in Budapest, Hungary. She was one of two daughters of Rosalia and Zoltan Laszlo. And here we have a portrait of Agi's parents, Rosalia and Zoltan Laszlo.

Agi spent the first six years of her life on a farm where her father was the manager. In 1936, the family moved to a house in the community of Miskolc. And this was the house that Agi lived in. And here we have a map of Hungary that shows the location of Miskolc, with our next arrow.

After German forces occupied Hungary in 1944, Agi's father died. Hungarian authorities ordered Jews to concentrate in certain urban areas, which were enclosed and referred to as ghettos. Agi her mother and sister were moved to the Miskolc Ghetto in northern Hungary.

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By mid-May 1944, the Hungarian authorities, in coordination with the German security police, began to deport Hungarian Jews systematically. Like thousands of other Jews, Agi and her family were sent to Auschwitz. Our map here shows the direction of the deportations from throughout Hungary, moving towards Auschwitz.

Later Agi, was interned at the Plaszow concentration camp, and sent to Rochlitz, where she learned to make airplane parts. Here we have a map of the major European Nazi camps, and our arrow points to the location of Plaszow. Eventually, Agi was forced, as I mentioned earlier, on a death march.

On April 28, 1945, Agi was liberated by American soldiers that were stationed in Garmisch, Germany. After briefly spending time in Innsbruck, Germany, Agi returned to Hungary. In 1949 she went to Israel, and later immigrated to the United States. And here, our final picture is a 1950 portrait of Agi.

Today, Agi resides in the Washington, DC area. She moved to the United States just two years ago after living in Israel since 1949, where she worked in the insurance field for 32 years. She has two children-- a daughter, Dorit, who lives here, and a son, Joni, who lives in Israel. She has four grandchildren.

Agi speaks four languages fluently-- Hebrew, Hungarian, German, and English. And I'm happy to tell you that she is just completing her training to be a tour guide here at the museum. I don't think you'll be lucky enough to have her as your guide today, but on your next visit, hopefully you'll have Agi as somebody who can give you a remarkable account of the Holocaust as she tours you through the museum.

And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our first person, Agi Geva. Agi, would you join us?

[APPLAUSE]

[INAUDIBLE]

Agi, thank you so much for joining us, and for your willingness to serve as our "first person" today. Thanks for being here.

Agi, let's begin with perhaps you telling us about your family, your community, and your own life in those years before war came to Europe.

I was born in '30 in Budapest, but we were living on a farm, as you told. And we had a very pleasant, comfortable life in Miskolc. Later on, my father lost his job, actually. Because of being a Jew, he couldn't be on high positions, and he just couldn't be accepted anymore. And then we opened a pension, a small hotel in Miskolc, what my mother was managing.

I had lots of friends. And I was at school in a gymnasium, and had a normal childhood, actually, up till a certain point, when we heard rumors of the surrounding countries of antisemitism, and--

Agi, you had described to me that, as a child, you took wonderful vacations. And you went to various places in Hungary. You described to me riding on a-- taking trips to ride on a model-- famous model trains. So it was just a generally just a very happy childhood for you.

Yes, those days. Yes.

And your father managed a farm, a large farm, for-- and I think a Hungarian aristocrat.

Aristocrat, yeah.

You had said something to me when we had a conversation that that was a time when you were filled with patriotism. Can you say a little bit about that?

Oh, well, yes. It was very painful later. But we all felt those days that we are Hungarians. We were assimilated Jews in

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Hungarian. And we felt very much like Hungarians. And I wrote numerous poems. And at school, I was talking a lot about it, and reading my poems.

And it was even worse later when it came out. The Hungarians were very, very bad to us, in a way, and helping the Germans to find all the Jews, and give them a helping hand in everything.

Agi, you said that your father had to give up his job running-- managing the farm, and you moved to Miskolc to open a pension, which-- a small hotel. Tell us a little bit about that, and particularly about, I guess, your father's health began to get bad at that time.

Deteriorated, yes. He was ill already for quite a while. And by chance, actually, on 19th of March 1944, he died that night. And when we phoned our relatives to Budapest to come to the funeral, they told that "Uncle Nazi" arrived. We cannot leave town. We cannot come. So we understood that the Germans invaded Budapest at that point. That was the sign.

And what did they say again?

Uncle Nazi.

Uncle Nazi had come to--

Come to visit.

--Budapest.

And we can't leave him. We can't leave. And when we came back from the funeral, the whole town was already full of Germans, with guns standing on every street corner. And it was very traumatic.

And that was March 19, 1944.

It was March 19, '44.

Just slightly more than 60 years ago today.

Yes.

I'm going to back up just a little bit, Agi. During those years, of course, war had broken out in late 19-- in September of 1939 in the rest of Europe. Your father, when he became aware that what was happening to Jews in other parts of Europe, he offered the family a couple of options, as you described it to me. Would you tell us a little bit about that?

Yes, that was a very, very hard time, when he came and told us that in Czechoslovakia, in Slovakia, in Germany the Jews are having a very, very hard time. He didn't elaborate. He surely knew. And he told my sister, my mother, and me that we can choose between two options. And the first one he suggested, we should come to-- we should go to Palestine immediately. We should leave Hungary immediately.

And my mother was in a shock. She told him, she can't leave her extended family. She had sisters, brothers everywhere. And she had-- we had property. And she says, how can we leave? Just take a suitcase and leave? She refused.

So my father came up with another option, that we have to change our religion. He says, maybe if we become Protestants, they might not deported. He didn't say the word "deported." We might escape all. But the Jews might suffer in Hungary the way they did in the surrounding countries.

And after a long deliberation, and then it was very, very hard. We did that. We studied, and we were Christian, and we became Protestants. It was a very, very hard decision.

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And yet, it did not end up making a difference for you.

No, it did not happen. It did not end.

And when I came back-- I mean, when we came back to Miskolc later many, many months later, I felt very uncomfortable with the fact, I went to the-- to the Rabbinate actually, and went through the mikvah and all the ceremony to become Jewish again.

In effect, convert back to Judaism.

Convert back to Judaism.

When you mentioned that your mom did not want to take the first option because of a large extended family--

It was a big mistake.

--how large was your family?

Also, my dad and my mother, they both had from eight to nine sisters, brothers, and nephews, and-- and nieces. And she just couldn't imagine to get up and go.

So you had a very large extended family. I think you told me earlier your parents each had eight or nine siblings each. And just-- so just all kinds of cousins and, as you say, nephews and other relatives.

Tell us about your sense of, in those years before the Nazis occupied, antisemitism. Was it something that you remember experiencing?

Personally, we did not experience very much of it. Our schoolmates stopped inviting us to their parties. We were two Jewish girls in the class, how many. And not everybody spoke to us friendly the way they did before.

There was no real evidence, besides knowing that the university stopped accepting Jewish students. So if we had any plans for later, this was not a plan anymore.

Mm-hmm. So your thoughts are going to college were over--

Was over, yes, as far as I was concerned, those things. I didn't know that some worse things will happen.

Right. And those worse things, Agi, after that date in March, the date that your father died and the Germans occupied your part of Hungary, how quickly did conditions really turn bad? I mean, tell us a little bit about--

Almost immediately. The next few days, weeks, within two weeks, we had to-- I mean, I'm talking about as a teenager. I had to come to the municipality with my dog. I had to come and give my bicycle away. We couldn't have pets.

You had to give up your bicycle?

We have to give them the bicycles. And we had to give the pets.

And we were devastated in many ways, because we couldn't go freely around wherever we used to before. And we had to wear a yellow star when you leave the house. And it started to become very traumatic.

At some point-- of course, your mom now is without your father. She's alone. She thought she might be able to save her two daughters by sending you to another village.

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Yes, we had a Christian friend. And she thought that she will take us in, and we might spend time there until the war is ending. And it was not a very good idea, because we couldn't go out to the street, and she was afraid that people will find out that she is harboring Jews. And we were sitting in the house the whole day, and hearing the radio, and hearing those terrible news. And we were scared, and phoned home that we want to come back.

So they sent a friend to pick us up. But she had to decide to take us without the yellow star. And it was very, very dangerous to be found out that we are Jewish, go walking around without a yellow star, because-- we didn't know how dangerous it was even then.

But we risked it. And it was a very traumatic trip in the train. The Germans were coming and looking at everyone hard, and many times, and they let people get off the trains. Anyhow, we arrived. We arrived safely, and it was OK.

In fact, you said to me that when you were on the train without your stars, going back home, that miraculously, when the Germans came on board, they just somehow just skipped over you--

Exactly.

--and didn't ask you.

Exactly. They didn't ask us, not for-- OK, we were kids, and they didn't-- we didn't look Jewish. I don't know. But it was the-- we were so lucky, simply.

Following that, if I remember correctly, you were then sent to work on a farm to do some very hard labor.

Again, my mother's thought, that in order not to go to the ghetto, she started to inquire. And we found out that if we go to work on a farm, it might, again, help. And some 30 families from our town volunteered. Actually, it was a volunteer in those times still.

And we went to a farm called [NON-ENGLISH]. And that's where we worked for a couple of weeks, very hard, from early in the morning. My mother cooked for the whole group. And we were outside in the fields till the evening.

But after a couple of weeks, the gendarmes came with papers, with orders that we have to come back. So it didn't help either.

And you're 14 years of age at this point.

I was 14-- actually, it was on my birthday that they took us back. And that was also the day of the first aeroplane attack, actually, on Hungary, [INAUDIBLE].

And that was on your birthday.

It was on my birthday.

Mm-hmm. Agi, there you are in the middle of June, and now you're back from the farm in Miskolc. And now you are sent for a brief period into the ghetto, which was just a way to round you up, in this case, before being sent elsewhere. Tell us about that.

Yes, we went home-- I call it still home-- to the pension that my mother managed those days. And she had to leave. And they told us we can take some belongings with us.

It was very, very hard to choose what to take with us. They took a doll, a book, some clothing. They could take only a small case, what where we could carry. And we were sent to the ghetto.

And we were there, thanks god, only for two days. But then, we didn't think that it was preferable to stay there and not

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to go on. And in the ghetto, it was also very bad conditions. People were crowded 10 to the room, and one bathroom for 50 people, and the kitchen, very bad kitchen conditions. And it was very hard. Anyhow, we were glad to leave, but we didn't know where we are going to leave.

So we took us to-- they took us to a brick factory that was actually on the railway station. We heard the trains coming and going, but we didn't know exactly what was going on.

So then tell us about what happened next.

And after a few days, we were taking on the trains. And we didn't believe that these are trains. These were cattle wagons with those big sliding doors. And we were herded into it, I think 80 people, 70 people to one wagon. That was a bit small window on top of one of the walls.

And no conditions. We had food for one day, water for one day. We didn't think how much-- how long we shall have to stay there.

The trip took some three or four days. Many, many people didn't make it. It was impossible to imagine sick people, babies, old people. It was very hard.

In our wagons, we didn't experience this. We were OK. And we arrived somewhere.

Who was with you in that car?

My family, all our friends. We tried to stay together. One of the most traumatic things were not to be separated from friends, relatives, mothers, sisters. It was very, very hard. So we were all together.

In the one car.

In one car. That's why we had no small children with us and no elderly people. It was all the friends of my parents those days, and my friends.

And little did you know what you were going to end up in a place called Auschwitz.

I didn't even know what Auschwitz was or what the name was for a long time. When we arrived, we had no idea what it is and where it is. We knew it's not in Hungary. We heard a foreign language that we have never heard before. And the doors opened. And people were falling out, actually, from those cattle cars.

And there were two groups. Immediately, they separated the men from the women. That was the first, immediate deed what they have done. And there were many desperate cries. And people were hysterical. And they didn't want to be separated from husbands, and brothers, and fathers and that. And it was very, very drama

But when it was done, then we stood in a line, slowly, slowly moving forwards. And we couldn't even imagine where this line goes, and what's happening in the beginning of the line.

We were surrounded with German- and Polish-speaking people. The Germans had guns. The Polish people, later we learned they were called kapos. And we were herded, like cattle, actually, the way we arrived.

And then my mother, it seems her responsibility, her-- took the better of her, and she started to go to the front of the line, moving very slowly, very carefully, that she shouldn't be noticed. And at the same way, she came back. And she talked very quietly to us that she found out several things, and we simply will have to do whatever she says.

She saw that they are separating families. And she said, we are not supposed to be sisters or daughters. We shouldn't call her "Mother." We shouldn't call each other sisters. And we-- our age has to be changed, because she saw that younger people, younger girls, were not staying together on one side.

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She saw the people went to the right side mostly with small kids, with babies on their arms. Women were sent to the right side. People with a cane, or older people, or people with health problems.

So she thought that on the left side there will be people who will be working. And that's always a good point. So she told us, as long as you say that you want to work, if that is possible to say anything, you should be in a working group. And that will not allow, of course, young kids the way we were. So you should say that you are 18 and I am 19. And she also saw 10 years-- she will also say 10 years less than she was.

And to demonstrate it, she-- we all had scarves with us. She told we should bind the scarves in a certain way that we look older and she will look younger. And this is something I can--

Where is the scarf? Is it the scarf right there?

Yes. And this is something I have to show you, that it's really so. If she bind-- she bound her scarf upwards, then she really looked a little bit younger. Like that. Something like that.

And she told us to bind our head that way. And we really looked older. I don't like. I look still older than I am.

[LAUGHTER]

That's the Kate-- Kate Hepburn look right now.

So Agi, your mother, while this very slow line, she was able to go up and observe, come back, and in that time craft a plan to have you and your sister wear a scarf a certain way so you can look a little older, say you're older, not act related. And your mother put the scarf down so that she looked younger than her years.

It might have made a big difference. We supposed so. We hoped it will help.

And it helped. Again, we were lucky. All the three went to one side. And she made a point that she will be the first, and I will be the second, and my sister will come after us. And we came, the-- we came, actually, on the same side.

And some of our friends made it. Some of our friends didn't. And my best friend's mother was taken away from her. And we can never find out why. She was at the same age like my mother. And a girlfriend, my girlfriend came with me and stayed with us for a while.

So there you are. You've at least-- you're together still. You're over on the side that's going to survive at this point. But you didn't know what was in store for you. What happened to you then?

Now we really didn't know what's in store for us. We were sent into a big building, and we were supposed to give our belongings, to put our belongings in one of the corners.

And people were clinging to their belongings. That was all what they had. And maybe they had valuables also. And they had sentimental value things with them. And they didn't want to get rid of it, and they didn't want to give it.

So there was quite-- there were quite many things about it. But they told us then that we are going to get it later. And it was impossible to imagine even, because there was such a big pile of all these small bags we had. And it was very hard to separate from them.

OK, we left it. And then we-- still we didn't know that it will be nothing

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