

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 sixth 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 experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. Each Wednesday through August 31, 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 listing of upcoming First Person guests. This 2005 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Doris Smith Foundation to whom we are grateful for sponsoring this year's program.

Charlene Schiff will share with you 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 a few questions. Before you are introduced to Charlene, I have a couple of requests of you.

First, we ask that if possible you stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions for Charlene as she speaks. And second, if you have a question during the question and answer period, try to make the question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so all in the room, including Charlene, hear it, and then Charlene will respond to your question. I'd also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition today know they're good for the entire afternoon. So if you stay to the end of the program, you're not going to not be able to get into the permanent exhibition today.

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, suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

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

We have prepared a brief slide show to help in the introduction of Charlene Schiff. We begin with this portrait of Charlene Schiff's family, her mother, Fruma, her older sister Tycha, and father, Simcha. Charlene's European name is on the right of the screen Shulamit Perlmutter.

On this map of Europe, the arrow points to Poland, where Charlene was born on December 16, 1929. Charlene and her older sister were raised by their parents in the town of Horochów. The arrow on this map of Poland points to Charlene's hometown.

We next have a picture of the market square in Horochów. Note the large wooden synagogue in the background. In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland. And three weeks later, the Soviet Union occupied Eastern Poland, where Charlene's hometown was located.

In 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union and set up a ghetto in Horochów. 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 United States 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 13 and 11.

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. I'm pleased to say that Ed is with us today. Ed, if you wouldn't mind just letting folks know you're here.

[APPLAUSE]

I would also like to mention that a very close friend of Charlene's, Professor Nechama Tec, who is a member of the museum's governing council, is also with us today. Charlene has been speaking-- there you go. Raise it a little bit higher. There we go. [APPLAUSE] Thank you.

Charlene has been speaking about her Holocaust experience since 1985. More recently, she has contributed to the museum's publication, *Echoes of Memory*, which features writings by survivors who participated in the museum's writing class for survivors. *Echoes of Memory* is available in the museum's bookstore.

I know you will also be interested to know that Charlene with her husband Ed have recently started a program to visit wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Hospital. With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Charlene Schiff.

[APPLAUSE]

OK. Just make sure it's good and comfortable for you.

Yeah. That's right.

[INAUDIBLE] Good.

Charlene, thank you so much for joining us and being willing to be today's First Person. Welcome.

Thank you for your warm welcome. And I do want to thank all you in the audience for taking the time and coming here and learning a little more about the Holocaust. Thank you.

Charlene, perhaps we could begin today with you telling us about your early life in your hometown in Poland, those first 10 years of your life before Germany invaded Poland. And maybe tell us a bit about your community and certainly about you and your family.

Well, to start off, my family consisted of a wonderful father and a wonderful mom and an older sister. And I know that I was the bane of her existence, but I wish she were here today so that I could apologize and tell her how much I loved her.

My early life in Horochów, it was a small town near Lwów. And at that time it was Poland. Horochów was a nice little town, where the Christians and the Jews worked hand in hand. And there was a harmonious life among all of us.

And just to give you an example, I know my mother and other Jewish women did get together and organized summer camps for poor children. There were summer camps for Jewish children. And then there were summer camps for Christian children. They were separate because of the dietary laws. But other than that, they were all the same. And that really was a very harmonious little town.

My father, who was a professor at the university in Lwów, it was Uniwersytet Kazimierza Wielkiego that still exists today. And my father was in the philosophy department. I for a fact that my father tutored some of the students for the entrance exams, which were very difficult. And if it was a poor student, he didn't take any money. And so I know this is just an example how we lived in our small town.

I had tutors from the time I was four years of age. My father believed that education is a priceless treasure and no one can take that away from you. And so he started that with suggesting that we start having tutors from the age of four.

My parents were wonderful people, I think. I'm sure I'm idealizing them now. But they were. And they gave us, my sister and me, a very solid background. And all the wonderful things that my parents taught me are still with me today. Life went on uneventfully and very peacefully and happily until the war started.

Charlene, before we talk about the war, maybe just a couple of other questions for you. One is, your sister Tycha, who is four years older than you, you described her to me as a musical prodigy.

Yes. My parents also believed in injecting and giving us a little bit of art and trying to get us educated in every department. And so they started with music lessons. But I was not a very good participant.

But my sister-- well, I guess I was not talented in that department. I was more of a tomboy. But my sister was very talented. And as a teenager, she was so good on the piano and on the violin that she gave recitals. And she was considered as a child prodigy in that department.

Charlene, as you said, you've described just really a wonderful life. But all of that changed dramatically when Germany and Poland-- Russia both attacked Poland. Tell us what you remember of those years before Russia was attacked by Germany when you were living under Russian control. But tell us what it was like at that time.

Well, in 1939, when the war broke out on, 1 September 1939, our lives changed. At that time, Eastern Poland was invaded by-- I mean was invaded by the Soviet Union. And of course, Germany invaded the rest of Poland. And at that point, our lives changed. We came under the occupation of the Soviet Union.

As a child, I'm sure there were many, many changes. I know that all of a sudden, there were shortages of food and of clothing. And some of the businesses had to close. And some people disappeared.

But as a child, I remember only one difference and one change. And that was the language. Until then, our official language was Polish. But when the Germans-- when the Soviet Union took over our area, the official language became Russian.

But the area that I come from is used to that. That area changes borders very often. And so most people have to be bi- or trilingual. And so that was not a big problem.

My father still kept his position at the university. My sister and I continued with school. But the official language became Russian. And that's as far as I remember.

Do you know if that sense of harmony in your community that existed, did that remain intact, at least to some degree, during the period of the Soviet occupation?

Yes, it did. It existed even then. There was some kind of a division. But I did not realize what it was. And this was because the Soviet Union was a communist country. And at that time, they tried to inject their ways of life into the lives of the people that they occupied.

But as a child, I just did not understand much. And I did not notice. As long as I still had my parents, I had my friends, and I went to the same school, it was all right. I know that it wasn't so, but in my mind--

For a child--

--that's the way I remember it. Yes.

Then of course, the Germans turned on the Russians. And then that changed everything profoundly.

Yes.

Tell us what happened beginning really with when the Germans took control of your town.

Well, when the Germans and the Russians, I guess, had a treaty a treaty. And then in 1941, the treaty

between Hitler and Stalin-- that's Russia and Germany-- was broken. And the Germans started to pursue their evil goals. They took over-- they entered into my little town, Horochów, almost immediately, not quite-- I don't know, I don't remember dates, but it was very shortly after they started the push onto Eastern Poland.

The minute-- the minute-- the Germans came in, the life for the Jewish people changed drastically. This is when really our horrors started. The first thing they did is they-- I think it was the first, second, or maybe third day, they gathered 300 Jewish leaders, my father among them.

And we didn't even have a chance to say goodbye. I will never forget the look on my father's face when they grabbed him. He saw them coming. And he tried to escape in the back door. But they wouldn't even let him get to the back door. The house was completely surrounded. And they wouldn't even allow him--

My father was a very formal man. And he always wore a suit jacket. And he wanted to put on his suit jacket because he was in shirtsleeves. They wouldn't allow him to do that.

But they grabbed 300 Jewish leaders, who were never heard from again. That was the last time I did see my father. My mother turned gray overnight. And she wore my father's jacket for almost the entire time that I remember after that.

After they grabbed the 300 Jewish leaders, whose names were supplied by our neighbors and former friends-- it's interesting how friends and neighbors with whom you lived a very peaceful and good life can turn to be your enemy overnight. These names were supplied by our neighbors and former friends.

But after they rounded up the 300 Jewish leaders, pretty soon they herded us into what was named after a while, I mean, as the ghetto. The ghetto was in the poorest section of town. It was surrounded. It was completely enclosed with high wooden fences that were reinforced with barbed wire.

There were only two gates. And these gates were guarded 24 hours a day. One needed a written permit to enter or exit the ghetto.

In the ghetto, we were assigned a space to live. I remember-- I'm not quite sure if it was a two or three story house, and there were about 100 people in that one house. We were assigned a room with three other families. And we had to build bunk beds as there was not enough room on the floor to accommodate everyone. We all used-- we all had one very primitive kitchen and one very primitive bathroom. That's for about 100 people.

All people 14 years or older were ordered to slave labor each morning and marched back to the ghetto in the evening. Often they would come home black and blue from beatings they endured during work.

Charlene, before we come back to the discussion about the slave labor, just a couple more questions about your father if I might. He was very proud of his library. And you told me a story about what happened to his library.

Yes, that was before we were herded into the ghetto when we were still in our own home. One day, a van pulled up, actually a truck, a covered truck, and several Germans burst in and demanded to see my father's private library. My father's library was known all over the area as one of the finest. He collected-- that was one of his passions. He collected rare books and first editions.

And as a matter of fact, I shouldn't deviate. I shouldn't digress. But before the war, my father's family, most of his family ended up in the United States. And he being the only male-- he had five sisters in the United States and my grandmother. And he was the only male, so he decided to be the last one to join them in America. Of course, that never happened because of the war.

But I remember many discussions between my mother and father, what we would take to America. And my father said the only thing he wanted to take is his books. But anyway, so now when the Germans came in and demanded to see where the books were, my mother had no choice but to lead them into the library. And

they took out all the books and gingerly packed them in the truck.

And this was the only time they addressed my mother in German, Gnadige Frau, meaning actually-- it's a sign of respect, where usually it was verfluchte Jude, I mean very curse words in German, you know, epithets that were not worth for human being. But at that time, they addressed her as Gnadige Frau. But gave her a receipt for the books.

They gave her a receipt for what they plundered.

Yeah.

Charlene, if you don't mind, knowing that was the last time you saw your father when he was taken with a group of 300 men, did you learn what happened to your father?

Well, I didn't learn anything until the end of the war. And now there are two versions. And I don't know which one is the right one.

One is that he ended up going, or they took him to the concentration camp Dachau. We were in Dachau, my husband and I, after the war and tried to look through the papers and all. We did not find his name there.

Then the other version was that the 300 Jewish leaders were led outside of my town, Horochów. They made to strip. And they were forced to dig a mass grave and that they were shot right then and there. I don't know which version is the true one to this day.

You were telling us, Charlene, about life in the ghetto and the extraordinary circumstances in which you were crowded into. And you started to tell us about being forced to do slave labor.

Yes. I mean people 14 years or older had to report for slave labor. Children younger than that were left to fend for themselves. In the very beginning, and it's very important to me to tell you this, that it seems that there was resistance in every ghetto, even the small ghettos. And I'll give you two examples of resistance in my ghetto.

One of them, when the women in the ghetto finally got organized, they did organize a clandestine school for children too young to work. They bartered their jewelry and whatever else they had for school supplies. And they organized a school in an old warehouse at night. This school took place at night when they came home from work.

And we, the young children, really looked forward to it because it took away our mind-- it took off our minds from the horrible hunger we felt all the time. But being with other kids our own age, singing and drawing pictures and reading stories, it was a wonderful, wonderful thing. And to me this is one of the ways of resistance.

Had the Germans found out about it, they would have probably liquidated the school. They would have probably killed some people for it. But luckily, they did not find out. And then again, this school did not last very long because the women ran out of jewelry and money for supplies, for school supplies.

Now, the other act of resistance was that as the ghetto was being organized, in the beginning it was rather chaotic. And I mean people were going back and forth. And there was-- I mean there was an awful lot of going on. And so about 20 of us, children, young children, who were too young to work, did get together and we dug a hole, sort of-- we called it the tunnel. And it was actually like a tunnel.

It started in the ghetto where the fence was. And it ended up in a kiosk outside of the ghetto. And the kiosk was in great disrepair. So really nobody paid any attention--

When you say kiosk, like a newsstand--

Yes.

--or something like that?

Yes. And this tunnel served a very wonderful purpose. We would take off our yellow Star of David that we were ordered to wear on the front and on the back of our clothing. And we would go into the tunnel, come out on the other side. And there, we would try to buy or in some way to obtain some food to bring back to the ghetto.

If one was caught, of course, one paid with one's life. But hunger is a rather strong motivator. And we have accomplished a great deal as children trying to help the families with food and other necessities.

And all under the age of 14.

Yes. And now, there were two things that happened at that time. And I would like to share with you. One of them it was my turn-- we took turns using the tunnel. And one time, it was my turn to go outside.

I took again, my mother-- and I'm going back again. Right after my father was taken away, my mother did gather all the little jewelry that she had, which wasn't very much. And she divided it into three little piles. She sewed in one pile into my clothing, another into my sister's clothing, and the third into her own. And this helped us survive in the ghetto and later on.

Well, anyway, it was my time to go outside, my turn. And I ended up on the outside. And I managed to buy two eggs for a gold and ruby ring, my mother's. And I was very happy and very glad that I was able to do that.

And I was walking back towards the camouflaged opening. But before I reached it, I was caught. The Ukrainian guard searched me. And he found the eggs. I remember it was a dress with puffed sleeves. And I put an egg in each sleeve.

He found the eggs, threw him on the sidewalk, rubbed my face in them, and screamed at me to go back where I belong and never to come out again. This was one of the very kind hearted guards. My bloody face healed. And I had my life.

A few days later, one of my friends worked her way through the tunnel and was able to obtain a half a loaf of bread. But she was caught on the way back and murdered. And the Germans didn't even allow us to bury her. She was on display for a number of days as an example of what not to do. She was only 11 years old.

These kind of things were happening every day in the ghetto. Morale and life deteriorated in the ghetto. I remember many bodies, dead bodies, piled up in the streets. And in my mind, I can still see them. The innocence and purity of their souls transcended the filth and stench around them. I speak for each one of them, and I cannot allow the world to forget.

Life in the ghetto deteriorated. And the next spring, we were ordered to move to a new, smaller ghetto--

Charlene, before you go on to the next ghetto, would you mind telling us about when you went to work and the incident that happened to you with the knitting needles?

Well, one time, my sister was very ill. And she could not report for work. Now, she did not report for work. That meant she would not get her daily food ration. And food was very critical for us.

And so I tried to persuade my mom to allow me to take my sister's place. I know my sister was 4 and 1/2, almost 5 years older than I. And she was with a group of older girls. But where she worked, this warehouse was guarded by Ukrainian guards. And they really didn't pay that much attention. As long as you reported when the roll call came, they just sat there, and you did whatever you had to do, which meant you had to knit clothing or accessories for the German soldiers.

And so I tried to persuade my mom because we couldn't afford to lose the food ration. And finally, she gave

in. And so this next morning, we got up. My sister still was very ill. My mother went into her group to go march off for work. Mainly, she was digging ditches and repairing roads.

And I joined the group of older girls who were knitting articles of clothing for the German soldiers. And the girls embraced me and showed me-- I mean we walked to the-- we marched to the warehouse, which was-- all these places were outside the ghetto. And there, they showed me where my sister's place was.

And I sat down and picked up-- I can't remember, but I think it was just a plain little scarf that she was knitting. And I picked up the needles. And I started knitting.

And everything would have been all right as it was ordinarily. But my exquisite bad luck, with my luck, a German inspection group came in that day. And they burst into the warehouse and spread themselves all around the room.

And one of the Germans positioned himself right behind me. I was much younger than the other girls. And I was rather clumsy in my effort to knit. But I kept on working as if everything was all right.

Well, he noticed that I was clumsy and I was slow. And he started cursing and yelling at me to knit schneller, faster. And the more he yelled the slower I was knitting.

And finally, he became very, I guess, angry with me. He pushed himself and stood right in front of my face. His face red and foam coming out of his mouth, and cursing and yelling at me. The more he yelled, the slower I was knitting.

And finally, he became very exasperated. He pulled the two needles out of my hands and stuck one of them in my right forefinger. I passed out. And obviously, I did not get the food ration that day. And I guess we were very lucky that there were no murders that day.

But I came home. And I was very sorry. And I apologized to my mother. And she just hugged me.

But my finger became infected. And there were no pharmacies. There were no doctors anymore in the ghetto. And consequently, I lost the tip of my right forefinger.

This was a small price to pay. But it was a good lesson that you had to beware. The Germans were so sadistic. Every day they did something awful in the ghetto. And they did do it with pleasure most of the time. There was a smile on their face, and they performed the most sadistic and most brutal things. I could go on for hours telling you about other examples. But every day there was something similar to that in the ghetto.

Thanks for telling us about that one though, Charlene. You began to tell us now that you were forced to move to yet another ghetto. And that of course, is when your mother decided to have a plan for escape and put that plan into motion. Tell us about that.

Well, in the spring of that 1942, it became evident that the liquidation of the ghetto would take place that summer. We did move to a smaller ghetto because the population dwindled considerably. And this new ghetto was also in an area of the town that is very, very-- in great disrepair.

But there was one thing. Three sides of the ghetto became enclosed as the old ghetto was with high wooden fences reinforced with barbed wire. But the fourth side was a river, the river which separated our town from a little village across the river. And we were lucky to have been assigned a space to live with some other families in a house right on the river, which meant that there was no enclosure.

Now, at that time, it was evident that the liquidation of the ghetto would take place soon. And so my mother, who worked outside the ghetto, as I said, digging ditches and repairing roads, still had some contacts on the outside. And she tried desperately to find a place, a farmer, who would hide the three of us.

She was unable to find one farmer who was willing to hide three people. But she did find two farmers. One was willing to hide one person. And the other was willing to hide two people. And at this point, my mother

had to make the difficult decision of how to divide our little family.

But finally she decided in her infinite wisdom that my sister, who was almost five, not quite five years older than I, would go to the single space, to the farmer who allowed one person to hide. And mother and I would go to the other place when the time was right. And I guess early August, I'm not quite sure when it was, my sister and my mother got up to go to work. And that was the day that mother decided it would be right for my sister to go right after work to the farmer who was willing to hide her while the liquidation was taking place.

I said goodbye to my terrific big sister. And we promised to keep in touch while in hiding. How? I have no idea. But that was Mother's job.

Anyway, my sister and my mother went off to work. My mother came back that evening. And we didn't hear anything from my sister. And so we decided that we thought that everything went according to plan.

I'd like to add too that my sister insisted that she would go with her violin. She would not leave her violin in the ghetto. She sneaked it into the ghetto too, because actually we were supposed to give it to the Germans. They took away all our material possessions before. And even after we went into the ghetto, there were decrees every day for different things.

But anyway, we didn't hear from my sister, which meant that she arrived at her destination and it was OK. And so a day or two later, Mother came home from work. We ate our meager meal. And my mother told me to put on the best clothes and shoes that I had and to take an extra set with me. She packed a small bundle for herself and one for me.

And she kept giving me instructions how to get to the farmers place after we crossed the river. But I knew where the farmer lived because before the war we used to buy dairy products from him. And in addition, one of his daughters attended the same school as I did. So I knew the way. And besides, Mother was with me.

Well, when it got real dark, we walked out of our place where we lived. Didn't say goodbye to anyone. But when it became dark, we walked out, hand in hand, and tried to enter the river. Excuse me.

Suddenly, shots rang out. We hid in the bulrushes. And we couldn't move. It was so quiet in between that any sound would have given us away. And so we stayed in the bulrushes in the river up to here in water. And I kept asking, Mama, when are we going to cross the river? She says, let's wait, we can't do it now.

Well, we stayed the whole night. And we could not cross the river because the sporadic shots kept coming at us. And by then, by morning, by early morning, other people from the ghetto also tried to get into the river. That was the only way to escape from the ghetto. Most of them ended up in the river. We heard the guards all around yelling, come out, Jew. We can see you.

And most of the people came up with their hands up. And they were murdered right then and there. Mother kept down, kept me down, and kept saying, wait, wait. We'll cross the river. You'll see. We'll do it. By that time, the sporadic shots became more regular at that point.

To make a long story short, we stayed in that river for several days. I'm not quite sure if it was three days or five days. It was very difficult because we could see the ghetto burning. We heard screams and babies crying. And smoke coming from the ghetto.

But it was very difficult because I know I became so quiet that I fell asleep standing up. I could not sit down, because if I did, I would drown. And at that time, shots were not just sporadic, they were coming from every way all the time. We stayed in the river.

One time, I dozed off. I don't know if it was three days or five days. And when I woke up, my mother was gone. And that was the last time I saw my mom.

That day, all became quiet. And I don't think I moved for the rest of that day. When night fell, I reasoned

with myself. And I felt that when I fell asleep my mother couldn't wake me and she made her way to the farmer by herself.

And so I crossed the river. And I walked most of that night. And when I came to the farmer's place, he wouldn't even invite me into his house. I ended up in the barn. And there, he was and he looked me up and down. And I asked him if my mother was there. He said, no, she wasn't there.

I said, well, I'll stay until she comes. He says, no, you will not. I'll allow you to stay the day and then you must go. And I looked, I said, well, you agreed with my mom that you let us stay here. He says, I changed my mind. And he says, if you don't go, I'll report you to the authorities.

Ironically, he was wearing dirty coveralls and there was my father's gold pocket watch and chain on his coveralls. That night, that evening, he didn't even bother to come out to the barn. His wife came out with a piece of bread and an apple and told me to leave. And so that is when my odyssey really started.

That first night, I walked and ended up in the fields. There were wheat fields. And it was harvest time. And I tried to make some sense out of my situation. Who would take care of me? Where was I going to sleep? What was I going to eat?

I had no answers. And I felt I had to find my mother. And so my search started. I felt that if she left the river, she probably ended up in the forests. That area of Poland abounds with forests. And so I started going from forest to forest in search of my mother.

The first few months, I met some stragglers from other ghettos, from other little towns. And we all compared notes. They all had the very similar experiences. They escaped from the ghetto, and they tried to survive by living or running from forest to forest.

There was one instance that is riveted and absolutely unforgettable in my mind. I met six other people, stragglers from different ghettos. One was a mother with a little baby not even a year old. And we formed a little group. We sat at the edge of the forest comparing notes.

All of a sudden, some children from a neighboring village spotted us. And they could tell that we were Jews by the way we were unkempt and, you know, disheveled. And anyway, they ran back to the village. They kept yelling, Jews, Jews, with glee in their voice. But they ran back to their village to report that they saw some Jews. There was a small monetary reward for reporting a Jew. And we knew we had to hide.

This forest was very low. There wasn't a lot of-- what do you call it-- underbrush.

Underbrush.

So when you look at a forest and you see the trees, maybe a mile wide, there was nowhere to hide. And so we ran into the fields. It was harvest time. And there were huge haystacks around. And their haystacks are long, narrow. They're something like big barns here.

And so we all ran and hid in one-- what do you call-- haystack. Haystack. Why we all hid in one haystack I am not sure and I can't explain. But that's what we did, the seven of us.

Soon the villagers came. And they made a game of it. They came with pitchforks. And they kept stabbing the haystack, back and forth, back and forth. They sang, and they were joking among themselves.

By the time they finished, I was the only one left alive. I was scratched and bloody. But I was not really hurt.

Actually, when I was hiding in that haystack, my only concern at that time was not to cough or sneeze. The dust in the haystack is so thick that it chokes you. And if I would cough or sneeze, they would know where I was. So I concentrated on that.

And it seemed like, I don't a, long time. And when I felt that it was dark, I worked my way out of the

haystack. And there were my companions from that afternoon, all dead, stripped of their clothes and shoes. The mother and the little boy, the one-year-old, together.

I remember when we met that afternoon I gave him a carrot that I had. And he was sucking on it. Before that, he was sucking on his mother's thumb. I didn't even know the names of the people that I met and that were murdered. I only knew the name of the little boy. His name was Buzio.

And so my odyssey continued. I ran from forest to forest in search of my mother. I never found my mother. And I never found any other people.

I don't know how to express it, but living like an animal and not having any human contact is as painful as thirst, hunger and cold and sometimes even more. There were many times when I risked my life just to hear another human voice. I've been asked often, which was worse-- which I don't know how to compare or how to measure worse or bad-- was it worse to be in a concentration camp or was it worse to be in the forests by oneself?

I don't know. But I would have given anything to have human companionship. I didn't have that. And loneliness was a very, very difficult thing to overcome.

Charlene, you were in the forest for two years. And it must have been brutally cold winters. How did you manage to somehow keep yourself from freezing to death?

Well, how did I manage? I don't know. You know, you're speaking now to an entirely different human being. I was young, and I was healthy. And I was ridden with guilt that I disappointed my mother and that she was someplace in the forests looking for me. I had to tell myself that because if I had thought that I would never find my mother, I would have given up much earlier. So that kept me going.

But I had a way of doing things. What I did is whenever I ended up in a new forest, I would dig a little grave. And I would dig it deep. And the soil, the ground in the forest is usually pretty soft. But I would find a place near a big tree. And then I would camouflage it on top.

And I would also try to work my way into vegetable cellars, which farmers had a lot in that area. And I would get some potato bags or some kind of clothing or whatever I could appropriate. And I would keep myself from starving and from freezing to death.

And every time you went to one of those cellars, your life was absolutely at risk at that point.

Yes. And I did have a number of confrontations. But it's-- I mean it would be too long to tell.

I had asked you when we first got together, I asked you if you, being in the woods, were ever threatened or fearful-- I imagine what it'd be like to be in the woods alone-- of wild animals. And you had an interesting response.

It's very strange. But the animals in the forests were my friends. They treated me like one of their own. I was never injured. I was never bitten by a snake. I was never bitten by an animal. And I've seen lots of them. If anything, they lent me their warmth. And they protected me. Not one animal hurt me.

The only enemies I had were the dogs. The dogs on the farms protecting their master's domain, so to speak, were really my enemies. Sometimes they would just bark and announce my presence. And so I had to leave. And other times, they were so vicious that they would bite ferociously and then leave me with wounds. But the dogs were the only enemies I encountered in all my horrible experiences, but not the animals in the forests.

In this short time, not even begin to do justice to describing what it was like for you in the forest, I imagine just this glimpse of it, the reaction everybody has is the same as I have. That it's almost just simply unimaginable. After enduring all that, you survived. Tell us how you were found and the circumstances you were found and then what happened to you when you were found.

How much time do we have.

I think we've got another good five minutes. And then we'll have time for a few questions and then wrap up.

Well, I was actually dying in one of the forests. I ate something that was not agreeing with me. I did not tell you that after a while when food was so scarce, I started eating worms, insects, and the like. And you don't want to know details about that. But I was very ill, and I was dying on one of the little graves.

At that time, it was 1944. I didn't know what year it was. All I knew in the forest that it was either very, very cold and wet or it was not so cold and wet. At that time, the Soviet Union soldiers were working their way, pushing the Germans back.

And my good luck, they happened to cross, work their way through the forest that I was dying in. A group of soldiers, several of them, from the division happened to step right on my little grave.

The little hole where you were.

Yes, that I camouflaged. And they felt that it was sort of something not natural. And to their credit, and as I said, to my very good luck, they investigated. And they found a human being. They cleaned me up. I was in my own filth. They cleaned me up. And they took me with them and put me in their field hospitals, which were tents that they erected in the forests that they worked their way through.

Eventually, they-- I don't remember any of this. I was told this much later. But eventually, they came to a city by the name of Lutsk. And there they found a regular hospital, where they deposited me with a note, which again, I'm paraphrasing because I did not see that note. The note apparently said, this is a child of the forests, treat her gently with great care. And they left me there.

And in that hospital, they nursed me back to reasonable health. And there, as far as when I got healthy, I realized what was going on. They told me what happened. And at that time for us, in Lutsk, the war was over. But it wasn't really over at that time because it was 1944.

But then I met there in Lutsk, I met the other survivor from my hometown. And both of us decided to go back to Horochów and hope-- and hope-- that we would find family and other friends who survived this horror of the war.

We made our way. It was very difficult because there was no organized transportation. It took us a number of days to go to Horochów. And when we came there, we were not greeted with open arms. The local populace was greedy. And they resented our survival because they felt that we came to claim our houses, our possessions that were left to them when we were herded into the ghetto.

Well, that was not so. All we wanted is to find our loved ones, family and friends alive. We didn't find anyone. Well, we came back. We made our way back to Lutsk. And there, other survivors who also gathered in Lutsk came back with the very same and similar reports that they were not welcome in their former homes.

It was so bad that at that time they started pogroms in that area of Poland. Now, these pogroms meant that the survivors, the Jewish survivors, were murdered after the war was over. One of the most infamous of pogroms took place in Kielce.

In Kielce, which is a Polish town, they gathered 42 Jewish survivors on a day very dear to us Americans, on the 4th of July, 1946, a year after the war was over. And in broad daylight, a group of local people got together and murdered the 42 survivors. This was a very, very strong statement that we were not welcome.

And so at that time, or actually a little earlier, the older people who survived told us children that we must get out of Poland. And the only logical place, ironically, at that time was for us to go to Germany. Why Germany? Well, because Germany at that time was in the hands of the four powers. So it was the United

States, Russia, Great Britain, and France.

And so we made our way. And again, it was a very eventful journey from Poland, from Horochów, from Lutsk, to Germany. When we ended up in Germany, there, we were received, greeted by the United Nations Rehabilitation and Relief Agency. They built what they called DP camps, displaced persons camps, where we ended up being invited to stay.

To get into a DP camp, the beginning of it, the first one, was rather interesting. For our own good, you had to go through a disinfection. Now, that meant that I had to strip completely outside. And there was a person a few feet away from me with a hose in his or her hand. I don't know if it was a man or a woman. And they didn't care what gender I was.

But they held this very thick hose. And all of a sudden, I started being sprayed with a white thick powder. That powder was very odorous. It smelled like sulfur or rotten eggs. And I was being hit and sprayed from the top of my hair to the bottom of my feet.

I got sick to my stomach. And they stopped for a minute. But then they kept on spraying more and more until every pore of my skin was covered with that powder. And when they decided, when the person who was spraying decided I had enough, I was ordered to go and take a shower.

And so the shower was in another building. And I had to go to the other building naked, covered in that horrible stuff to take a shower. There, I took a shower. I went into a stall, turn on the water. It felt wonderful. It was cold water. There was no warm water at that time. But it still felt wonderful.

And for the first time in five years, I felt clean. I received the most wonderful gifts. I received a towel, a cake of soap that I haven't seen in five years, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a dress, underwear, socks, and shoes, and also a pillow and a sheet. And then when I was clean for the first time in five years, I was told go to barracks 2, bed 12. That was my first place after the war that I felt safe and I wasn't worried about my life.

At that time, I remembered my grandmother's address in the United States. And so I wrote to her in Polish saying that I survived and I would very much like to join the rest of the family in the United States pretty soon. I did receive an answer in English, which I had to translate because I didn't speak a word of English.

And in that letter, with papers, I was informed that my grandmother was not living anymore. But the rest of the family did get together. And they sent me affidavits, which verified the fact that I would not become a burden to the government and consequently to allow me to join my family in the United States.

And so with these papers in hand, I was already dreaming of being in the United States. But not so fast. I came to the consulate. And shades of my father before the war. Oh, yes, these papers are fine, but you need something more. And this went on for three years. I was not allowed-- I mean I finally was given permission to join my relatives in these United States on June 25, 1948. I spent another three years in DP camps waiting to join my relatives in the United States.

Charlene, thank you for bringing us up at least to the point of coming to the United States. And we are out of time. My apologies for questions. But as you can see, we could have sat here with you for the next three or four hours.

May I just--

Yes, just before we wrap up--

I want to wrap up.

Let me say one thing before we do, Charlene. I want to, first of all, thank all of you for being here. I want to thank Charlene very much for being our First Person. I'd like to remind you that we have a First Person program every Wednesday until August 31.

Next Wednesday, that's June 15, we will present a rather unique First Person program as next week we will have two First Persons, husband and wife, Helen and Willy Luksenburg. We featured them on First Person in the past individually, but not together. Both Helen and Willy were born in Poland. After Germany invaded Poland, Helen and Willy would meet as slave laborers at a concentration camp. After being sent on a death march by the Nazis after the Russians were closing in, they were separated and would not know whether the other was alive until well after the war.

So if you can come back next Wednesday or any other Wednesday until the end of August, please do so. It is our tradition at First Person-- and before I go to that, Charlene, will you be available for a few minutes afterwards if anybody wants to chat with you. Yes,

I will.

So please, if you have a question-- I know you're brimming with them. I know I am-- please see Charlene afterwards over on the side and be happy to talk to you. But it is our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. So, Charlene.

My plea to you, dear friends, together, we must fight what I call the four evil I's-- the evils of indifference, intolerance, ignorance, and injustice. These evils are as pertinent today as they were 60 years ago. It seems we have learned little from our past.

In the '90s, we had Kosovo, Rwanda. Now, we have Darfur, Sudan. We still have genocide, antisemitism, and racism. Our nation is a tapestry of many colors, different cultures together, all privileged to enjoy the same freedoms. Our young people are our dearest treasure, our future, our hope.

In the next generation, we look forward to that tapestry blending in perfectly in a beautiful, colorful mosaic, in harmony and peace, free of hatred, bigotry, and prejudice. My ardent wish, may the next generation of our great country serve as an example and beacon for the entire world.

Now, I will also tell you in a short sentence or two why I volunteer at this museum. I do so because I feel I have a mandate, a duty, a sacred duty, to bear witness and to honor the memory of the millions who perished at the hands of the Nazis. I am their voice. And I must make sure that the world never forgets. Thank you for being such a good audience.

[APPLAUSE]