

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. Thank you for joining us. We are in our seventh season of First Person. And our first person today is Mr. Haim Solomon, whom you 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 survivors. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. With just two exceptions, we will have a First Person program each Wednesday until the end of August. The museum's website at [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)-- that's [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)-- provides a list of the upcoming First Person guests.

This 2006 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Dora Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for sponsoring this year's program. Haim Solomon will share with us his first-person account of his experience during the Holocaust for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Haim some questions. Before you are introduced to him, I have several requests of you. First, we ask that, if possible, stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That would help minimize any disruptions for Haim while he's speaking.

Second, if you have a question during our question-and-answer period, please try to make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so all in the room, including Haim, can hear your question, and then he'll respond to it. Also, I'd like to ask that, if you have a cell phone or a pager on you that's not turned off, to please turn it off. I'd also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition today know they are good for the balance of the afternoon, so you can stay with us until 2:00 and then still be able to go to 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 Haim Solomon is one individual's account of the Holocaust. Haim was a teenager of 14 in late August 1939, when Germany and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact and agreed to divide Eastern Europe between them. Romanian authorities quickly ordered all the Jews in the area of Haim's village of Bivolari to move further west to the city of Iasi.

In June 1941, Germany turned on the Soviets and invaded Russia. That unleashed a vicious pogrom on the Jews of Iasi. And life was forever changed for Haim and his family. As the Russians advanced to the west, Haim and his family moved again, this time to Bucharest, where they remained until the end of World War Two.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Haim's introduction to you. Haim Solomon, born November 5, 1924 in Bivolari, Romania, was the youngest of five children. On this map of Europe, the arrow points to Romania. After Germany and the Soviets signed the non-aggression pact of August 23, 1939, which divided up Eastern Europe, the Soviets occupied Bessarabia. This caused Bivolari to be a kilometer away from Romania's new border with the Soviet Union.

Due to their suspicions of Jewish loyalties, especially given the proximity to the Soviets, the Romanian authorities ordered all Jews to leave Bivolari. The first arrow on this map of Romania points to the town of Iasi, where Haim and his family moved. Later, in June of 1944, Haim and his family moved to Bucharest to escape fighting and chaos erupting around them. Our second arrow points to Bucharest, where Haim and his family remained until the end of the war.

In the summer of 1947, Haim, along with thousands of other Jews, attempted to emigrate to Palestine. The ship that Haim was traveling in was captured by the British. They removed the passengers and detained them in Cyprus. In this photograph of Haim behind a barbed wire fence, it was taken in Cyprus during his imprisonment there. Finally, in December of 1948, Haim escaped the British prison camp on Cyprus and succeeded in reaching Israel.

Haim came to the United States in 1952. Today Haim and his wife Malva live here in the Washington D.C. area. He retired January 1, 2003 following a 38-year career with the Federal Food and Drug Administration, where he was a microbiologist and is one of the world's leading experts on the microorganism that causes botulism. He has over 70 scientific publications under his name. In this day of bioterrorism concerns, I have no doubt that his name is on a short list of people to call if there is a major outbreak of botulism.

Malva, his wife, is a physician with the Veterans Administration. Haim and Malva have two sons. One was recently awarded his PhD in microbiology, and the other is a producer with a local sports talk show, one that I tune to listen to the Baltimore Orioles games. Haim and Malva are new grandparents, and they're very proud of their six-month-old grandson. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Haim Solomon.

[APPLAUSE]

You're clear there.

OK.

Haim, thank you so much for your willingness to be our First Person today. And welcome to our audience as well.

Thank you.

You described your early years before Germany and the Soviet Union signed their non-aggression pact as almost idyllic. Tell us why that was so. What was life like for you and your family and your community in those years prior to the outbreak of war?

As Mr. Benson quickly summarized my Holocaust odyssey, it consisted of moving, running, hiding, bribing, escaping, and surviving. To begin with, I spent my childhood in a small village called Bivolari on the northeastern side of Romania. On the east side of Bivolari, about 1 kilometer, ran the river Prut that separated the province Bessarabia, populated by a Russian-speaking populace.

The village itself consisted of one unpaved street. And in the middle of it was another westward going smaller one. And about 200 Jewish families, 1,200 people together-- a very well organized community and managed. At the end of that second street, the Jewish community built a Israelite Romana primary school, a communal bath, a matzah factory, a-- whatever, so a lot of more smaller institutions. We had there four years.

Along the main street, Jews had stores, one aligned after another, and workshops of all sorts of materials. We had four synagogues, one rabbi. What else?

Haim, tell us a little bit about what your father's occupation was.

My father had one of the stores, of dry goods. And at the time, nothing was ready. You sold the dry goods that went to a-- were taken to a tailor. And the tailor made you shirts and pants and suits and everything else.

And you were the youngest of five kids, is that right?

The youngest, that finished primary school, and then the same teachers would prepare us for advanced classes for which we would travel to the larger city of Iasi and there be examined and advanced to the next grade.

Haim, you also told me that, because it was a small village and it was rural, that really all of you, everybody in the family, you had to do whatever needed to be done to get by each day. And you had a particular task at times of, I believe, getting water, but very different than our experience of getting water.

Bringing water from the fountains, which are no longer there. But surrounding our village were 5,000, 6,000 peasants.

They had cows and horses and goats and other animals. And behind them was a large, grassy knoll that they used for pasture and we used for sports activities. On Sundays and Mondays, they would bring their produce to the village, sell it to merchants, and with the money buy things in the stores.

Our relationship was cautious but amicable.

Between the Jewish community and the--

And the thing-- yes, and the surroundings. And we just stayed put during the day and very cautious at night.

Do you recall any anti-semitic behavior towards you or your family and friends at that time?

Not really.

So generally, as you say, relations were cautious but reasonable.

Right. So, this went on till August 23, 1939, when Hitler and Stalin signed a non-aggression pact and divided Eastern Europe by their language. And the Russians occupied Bessarabia. That was peopled with Russian-speaking people. That means they were 1 kilometer from Bivolari. Accordingly, the managers or the leaders asked the Jewish population to move west. And starting as a small movement, mostly the merchants, we packed up in 1940, the middle of 1940. One big truck took whatever we could, left everything else, and moved 50 kilometers south and 20 kilometer west to the next-- to the bigger city of Iasi.

Iasi had a population of 100,000 in general and 50,000 Jews, to which another 10,000, 15,000 from the smaller cities of - smaller villages that were ordered to move. So, it brought up the Jewish population to 70,000 people.

Out of a city of now about 110,000 or 20,000.

Right. Life was adaptable for another few months, 10 month, because in June 21, 1941, Germany invaded Russia. And all their armies passed through Iasi to the river Prut.

Before we talk about that stage, when the Germans attacked Russia, a little bit more about your time in Iasi before that. But also, your family had lived in Bivolari for how long?

80 years.

And now--

Grandparents.

Now you, your family, your entire community was asked to pick up and move to another place a distance away. What was that like for you as a now 15 years old? What do you remember of being forced to literally leave your home behind?

All sorts of meetings. People said we should don't, and others who said we would. Mostly the merchants packed up, like we did. We had a woman that worked in our house, and we left her the keys with a lot of furniture in.

You left here the house?

Yes.

And of course, with no knowledge or certainty that you might come back to your house someday.

No intention.

No intention.

No.

When you got to Iasi, you-- in a conversation you and I had, you, before the Germans attacked Russia, you described it as somewhat of a-- you said life was reasonable. But you referred to it as a "fool's paradise." Do you remember saying that to me, your life there?

Yes.

Say a little bit about that.

Oh, there were Jewish theaters too. There were organizations. There were meetings, really freedom almost. And the moving to Iasi was an aberration that will be corrected eventually.

That was the prevailing kind of attitude?

That was the feeling.

So you attempted to have life as normal as possible. Yet, hanging over you was something much more ominous, I think is what you're feeling was.

Exactly.

Was your father able to continue the same business in Iasi?

Yes. We found a house in the corner of a three-street corner. And 12 blocks away the father and the older brothers rented a store and continued with all those customers that would come to Bivolari now came to Iasi. In fact, many of them occupied our places and opened stores of their own.

The stores you'd left behind.

Yes.

So did they become competition for you in that way?

Oh, no, no. The contrary. They came to us to buy in Iasi for Bivolari.

So they still needed your abilities and experience and knowledge.

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Was your family still intact at this point, when you moved to Iasi.

Yes.

Yes. OK-- and probably, I think you said, living together, in fact, with one sister. I think one sister got married, as I recall.

Right.

Yes.

Older sister.

So here you are in Iasi. And you started to tell us, of course, that changes in June 1941.

Yes. That was the big surprise because Germany invaded Russia. And German tanks and soldiers marching, singing soldiers came through Iasi. And we felt that atmosphere and stayed indoors. June 21-- on the 26th, the Russian Air Force bombed the train station in Iasi and caused a lot of damage to Romanian and German troops. And so on the 28th, on the excuse or on the reasoning that Jewish communists signaled the Russian-- the pilots where to drop their bombs, a pogrom was initiated that left 10,000 to 12,000 Jews dead.

The exact scenario was that they would come around to Jewish neighborhoods and ask the people to go to the police station to exchange their ID cards. And once there, the German troops took over, herded all the incoming people into a closed yard by a stone wall. And the Germans started beating, stabbing, shooting, and pushing them all together.

My brothers were early, so they found their way by the wall. And towards evening, they jumped over the wall and looked for shelter until they found a famous family, the non-Jewish family that had a shed with firewood up to the ceiling stacked. And they removed the top layer of the wood, crawled into it, and replaced it so that for three, four days they could stay there. And several times they came to look and found just firewood and left. So--

This was two of your brothers.

Yes. Henry and Reuven. After two days of this pogrom, the remaining Jews were taken to the train station and there placed in boxcars, 120, 140 per car, and taken out on a trip to nowhere, back and forth in the July heat with no food, no water. Half of them were dead after one day. They would remove the dead, bring others to, again, crowd them together and continue.

They knew not where to take them until they stopped in various cities and inquired whether to leave them. There was one place in Kalarash, south of Iasi, where there were some camps. And they hoped to take them there. But they got there and found too many already. And so they returned them. Whatever was left, they returned them to Iasi.

So in the course of just really several days, several days--

Five, six days.

Five or six days, after blaming the Jews for the bombing of the railroad station, killed outright, I think you told me, between 10,000 and 11,000 or 12,000 murdered, like in the courtyard where your brothers were.

No, no, no, in the trains, together with the ones that were--

Total killed. And then after taking them in the trains back and forth to nowhere, bring them back to Iasi.

Yes.

But now 12,000 are dead.

Yes.

Where was your father during this time and yourself?

Our brothers stayed in a store about 10 blocks away from home. And they decided to go, as I describe them. But my father at home and myself and a few other neighbors insisted that we not go. And he was well aware, by informers, former friends whom he bribed, and we were hidden in that basement of that three-cornered street.

Our house had three exits. And whenever they came in one, we were out the other. For two days we played this game.

And we came through with it.

And if I remember correctly, there were several others with you that your father had advised to not go.

Not go-- and forever they were grateful and survived.

And what about the women in the family? They were able to stay in the home during this time?

Yes.

And so the Nazis would come to the door, look for you?

There are cases where many women went with their husbands. But my family-- aunt, uncle, they went together. And they sent her home. And him, they put in a train and never came back.

So you were able to, because your father knew enough, he thought it would not make sense to go down and report and change his ID card.

No. He indicated, I will bring you ID cards next week, no matter what.

So that saved you. And I think just the ferocity of what you described, the loss of life in such a short period of time, what happened then, after this initial outburst, this pogrom for six or seven days, all this terrible killing. Then what happened?

Then the six, seven days, mother went after-- we were notified when to bring back the brothers. The authorities tried to be reasonable. They indicated that every family has to submit one volunteer for hard labor, or labor, or pay a certain amount. In our house, I was put as a volunteer with some prearrangements. An officer asked who could help him with bookkeeping, and I raised my hand. And he took me to his office at a hospital, where now were Romanian and German wounded soldiers.

And condition was that-- and as curfew was instituted, he would come and pick me up and bring me home at night after 9, 10 hours of stay put, as he said. Don't go out. And I worked on his books for a year. And in July '42, he stopped coming, and I stopped going.

He must have found another paying volunteer to renew his work.

When you were telling me in some detail about this, as I recall, he was a heavy drinker. And--

Yes.

--and he would-- you basically-- but he was responsible for all the purchasing for this hospital.

Correct.

So, you essentially are managing all the books, and he was not able to do it.

Yes.

And you're just a 15, 16-year-old boy.

But in my schooling, I was trained on that area.

Amazing.

And what was your father and the rest of your family able to do now during this period?

Again, they found a store.

They did? OK.

They were able to travel for supplies in the same dry goods profession.

And when your work for this officer-- when he stopped coming for you, what did you do then?

I tried to go back to school, tried to advance my schooling. I already had two years of high school, and I needed two more for a certain examination. And the other four, you'll see in 1945.

And so you were able to-- there was schooling still available for you at this time?

If not in the school, because it was dangerous to go, you could present yourself for examinations and advance to the next grade.

So as you said a couple of times, despite the circumstances, this attempt to try to have some normal life, continue your education during these very difficult times, you ended up being in Iasi for five years. And then at that point, your family picked up, moved again, this time to Bucharest in June of 1944. Tell us why the family then moved to Bucharest, what prompted that, and then what life was like there.

If you recall, after Stalingrad the Russians kept pushing the Germans westward. And actually, they arrived in 1944. They arrived at the river Prut that I mentioned. And they suddenly stopped, preparing or getting ready to attack Iasi, center of railways.

So the impression and the indications were that Iasi would be fought street by street. And it would be advisable to not be there. So we again packed up and moved, this time 600 miles southwest, to Bucharest. And there again, we found a house and a store and quietly and slowly continued or renewed our lives.

How did you make a move of 600 miles?

Oh, these were-- the main roads were now traveled by retreating German soldiers and Romanian deserters ran out and ran home. So we used the old roads and organized the five, six, or eight families that did that. And we traveled in the other old roads with no impediments.

You had mentioned to me that Bucharest itself was not a war-torn city like so many others. Why was that?

Why was it?

It just had not been bombed or anything?

No. We could see the American planes pass through. But they went, oh, 100 miles north, to refineries in Ploiesti.

Were you aware during this time-- this is summer of 1944. Was there awareness of what was happening?

Oh, yes. We knew what's in the east coast, east frontier. And the Prut and the Iasi-- Iasi really became almost like a ghost town. A lot of people left, not specifically to Bucharest, but to small villages away from the city.

Center of the war.

Yes.

Were you aware of what was happening to Jews elsewhere in Europe at the time?

Oh, yes.

So you had knowledge of that?

Right.

What then happened once you got to Bucharest? And you re-established yourself again.

Yes, and expecting the Russians to arrive any day, which they did in January '45. They broke through. They got to Bucharest. They arrested or killed all the leadership, opened up the prisons, brought out all the communists and the socialists, and asked all the merchants, Jews, to go back and invigorate the commerce.

One of the things you mentioned to me, and you just mentioned a moment ago, that the US planes were bombing towards the oil fields of Ploiesti.

Right.

Describe for us what the site-- you described to me the site of seeing us planes flying overhead.

We were lying on the roofs and waving to them.

And cheering them on.

Yes. They couldn't see us, but--

I think you referred to it as beautiful formations.

Yes, they did because they were the-- what was it-- bombers and fighters. And there was no real opposition to them. The Romanian forces were decimated on the east coast-- on the east. Yeah, war.

So the Soviets were able to take Bucharest easily in January of 1945.

Yes.

Was that a very frightening time for you though because you're living there now?

No. Originally we embraced them and tried to be friendly with them. And they tried to be friendly with us until they started pickpocketing or roughing us up for things that they liked.

Personal things that they--

Personal things, yes.

You mentioned one in particular, watches.

Watches. They explained to us that, in Stalin's days, soldiers were supposed not to know what day it is, what month it is, or what time it is. So a watch was something very unusual to them. And they picked them up from our hands as we shook their hands and hung them up inside their coats.

A collection of watches in their coats.

Yes, when they opened up.



So they'd come shake your hand, see you had to watch on, take your watch, put it in their coat.

Or if you had some rings or earrings, whatever.

Was your father-- and now the new authorities, the Soviets and the Romanians, trying to reestablish commerce, they asked the Jewish merchants to go back to work.

Yes, particularly the streets of commerce.

And so was your father able to do it again?

Right.

And staying in Bucharest at this point.

Yes. It was promising. But as conditions became more oppressive, we started thinking of leaving. My older brother left in '45 or '46. And then I started-- I went back to school. Really, that was a great opportunity, that you could finish one grade in six months. So in two more years, I could finish high school and graduate.

So that was actually a policy of the government, to allow you to finish--

Yes. 1945 to '47.

Allow you to finish a school year in six months so you could move along rapidly.

Correct.

Did your other siblings, were they doing that as well?

My middle brother.

At this time, the war is over. It's 1945 and 1946, and you're still in Bucharest.

Yes.

Tell us, had most of your family that had stayed with you through that whole time, had they been able to stay intact, and was everybody still alive at this point?

Yes. I enumerated my episodes, my Odyssey. But the main point, the main ingredient was luck. And. Being not at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Do you do you recall, Haim, if you knew, if you had a sense of where all those that you had grown up with back in Bivolari and then the people you knew in Iasi. What had become of the people that you knew and grew up with?

Almost half of Bivolari did not leave.

Oh, they did not leave. They just stayed put.

No. And on June 21 or 26, 27, when they prepared the pogrom in Iasi, they brought them walking from Bivolari, all of them. And they disappeared. They went straight to the train station. On the way walking they were robbed and beaten by wherever they passed through. Some came back to Iasi.

In a little bit, I'd like you to tell us-- not quite yet, but, Haim, just recently made your first trip back to Romania.

Yes.

And I'd like you to share a little bit after we talk a little bit more about your decision to leave Romania and emigrate to Palestine. I'd like for us to talk about that. I do think people would be very interested about your return to Romania recently.

So tell us, your brother, he was first to go to Palestine.

Right.

And so then you made your plans. Tell us about your father and your mother's thoughts about where they were going to go and your decision to go.

Their idea was that things will change, and we will be back where we were, not to Bivolari, but in Bucharest. Possibilities looked very good. And we should stay put. But I did not believe that. And as my brother left, I started looking for the same way. And by the middle of 1947, in July, two large ships were organized to emigrate to Israel, or Palestine at the time.

These were two Panamanian ships. And they arranged shelves or cubicles in them so that people could only lie down and not stand or walk.

Before you tell us about going on the ships, from what you've told me, it was-- you couldn't just simply, even though the war had been over for a couple of years, you couldn't just simply get up and say, OK, I'm-- it's now time for me to go to Palestine.

No, but--

Tell us how you did that, how you arranged it.

This Aliyah, this going to Israel was organized in July, or started to being organized. And in Bucharest and in Romania, there were many Zionist organizations, one of which I belonged to. And they each received certain numbers of immigrants. And I was one of them.

But you had to slip out of Romania, didn't you?

The thing was organized to exit by December 21, '47. The ships were in Constanta, which is the Romanian port to the Black Sea. But the British authorities, who still controlled Palestine at the time, insisted to the Romanians not to be part of this illegal immigration. So the Romanians replied that no ships or no immigrants would leave Romania.

Accordingly, our trains, now full of 16,000 people, turned south to Bulgaria instead of east to Constanta. And in Bulgaria there is a port, Burgas. And there the ships waited for us. And the trip took 10, 12 hours, but we got there. And within 10 hours we boarded the ships and started our trip to Palestine.

And as you noted earlier, there were 16,000 of you divided between two ships.

Right, mostly Romanian Jews, some from Hungary, Czechoslovakia-- very few. And in Bulgaria, about 200 just stood at the port, and they just pushed themselves in. Anyway, we passed the Bosphorus, where the Turks were greeting us, Dardanelles, and got into the Aegean Sea, and soon enough in the Mediterranean. These are international waters, so the British, who realized that we didn't leave Constanta but we left anyway, so they pursued us until we got into the Israeli, Palestinian territorial waters.

There they boarded a ship about three miles from Haifa. And after all sorts of promises-- we wouldn't rebel, and they wouldn't do this or that-- they took us to Cyprus. But the Queen's military wasn't prepared for all these people. So while

it took us 10 hours to board the ships, took five, six days to unload. They didn't have tents. They didn't have beds. They didn't have blankets.

So you're all confined to the ship until they can get you off.

Yes. And that was in Cyprus. Another-- from one camp to another.

And of course, you were so close to reaching your goal, three miles from Haifa. You were not deterred. You are now in Cyprus. And now begins the planning to get out of Cyprus.

To get out. Yes.

Share that with us.

As we arrived in Cyprus, all the youngsters joined the Haganah, the Israeli defense forces that will become the military. The Haganah divided our days into three activities. One was studying Hebrew, including Bible.

And this is in the camps, the British prison camps.

In the camps, yes. They allowed Palestinian teachers to come to teach us. Other activity was a paramilitary activity of sports and hand fights. But the main one was studying and preparing to escape. And for that we had to know exactly about the camps.

The camp, one camp was at the main port, Famagusta, north of it. Cyprus is south of Turkey and west of Lebanon, 20 miles to Turkey and 80 miles to the coast. The camp itself used to be a British camp for German prisoners. Now it's empty. And it's guarded by two fences, a double fence of barbed wire, about 10 feet between them. And in between there are rolls of barbed wire, called concertina.

And every 100 yards guards, post guards, with one or two soldiers in them. And we needed to know exactly when they changed the guard. And so every night we used to-- they hid their toilets by the fence. So we were able to go there. Every time one went, one went back, and was able to write down the hour, when the guards fall asleep, and when the guards-- all sorts of--

You knew everything about them.

About them.

Yes.

And also try-- how far from each one would be a point where they wouldn't be able to observe it. We lived in tents because ours was called a summer camp, which was divided into six complets, little ones, also separated by barbed wire, single fences. But you could go from one to the next by going upstairs, across the wire, and down to the next camp.

We lived in tents. But they also made for us large, large tents for meetings and other activities, which we used for practicing with real guns, while outside girls would dance and sing and make other noises.

While you're inside the tent practicing military maneuvers.

We also had a replica of their fences, and without any lights or in the dark, practice breaking through. I specialized in one of them. With a partner, you cut the first fence, roll into the concertinas because when you prick that, it starts running. So you had to keep it steady. And cut the next fence, and bring out eight, nine, maximum 10 youngsters of military age.

The understanding was that, if caught, they should raise their hands and surrender. One youngster refused, and he was

shot dead. Anyway, if not caught, the understanding was to crawl or walk about 100 or 120 yards to a passing road and lie in the grass and wait. And when a certain truck came up at 1 o'clock and turned off the lights, and one of the passengers or the passenger came out and sang or whistled an Israeli tune, we all ran into the truck, and the truck took off.

While we were in Cyprus, the Greeks were fighting for independence, also from Britain. And they were very helpful and collaborative. And they did all our night work. So they picked up, after three or four times that I myself was caught-

So you made three or four attempts before you finally got the successful--

Three.

Three attempts.

From that road, they would drive us to a orange grove. And there was a large warehouse, where they kept us for seven, eight days, until they had 80 people or 100. But there were other camps in the north, the winter camps. So sometimes it took four or five days only.

And the same truck or trucks came after four or five days and picked us up and took us to a beach, where Israeli fishing boats came to fish in Turkish waters. And with rubber boat and flashlight signing, they were able to bring us into-- take us into the boat. And another eight hours, we would be in Palestine.

And you finally made it.

Yes. The third time, I finally made it. The second time was very adventurous because we-- I was caught in the summer camp the first time. They picked us up to their offices and to interrogation-- who organizes you? How do you do it? And everyone knew the same answer. We get together, and we decide to go.

So it was like spontaneous. We all got together and it just worked out.

But the main punishment was to transfer you from summer camp to the winter camp. And of course, 10 days later, we tried to escape, but to make noise or to be caught again and brought back to the summer camp.

[LAUGHTER]

OK. Except that they didn't catch us at the fence. And the arrangement was that, if at 1 o'clock we're not there, and the bus-- the truck came and couldn't find us, we should find some form of shelters, either in trees or in holes in the ground. Indeed, we found a large grotto, where we went down and stayed there till 1:00, 2 o'clock in the afternoon. The idea was to go back to wait for that truck to pick us up. But two British soldiers were kicking a can as a soccer ball. And suddenly the cane drops right into our grotto.

One says, let's go. The other one said, no, we have to retrieve our can, or ball. And they found us. So they took us to the station and interrogated us. And in fact, they beat us up because they either recognized us or whatever. But no information, and no, they gave up.

And I remember that, after this interrogation, I started singing. And the British soldier was so impressed that he really-- he loves music himself, and you bloody so-and-so must love music. So he behaved very nicely with me.

[LAUGHTER]

So whenever you're in trouble, sing.

I hope you-- [LAUGHS]

It works all over. Haim, why don't we now turn to our audience and ask them if they have some questions they'd like to ask of you. And remember, I'll repeat the question, and then Haim will respond to it. Yes ma'am?

I'm not sure now if I want to hear you sing or ask my question. Could you describe your faith in God and maybe how it evolved before, during, and after the Holocaust?

The question is, Haim, for you to describe your faith in God and how it may have evolved or changed from before the Holocaust and during it and after.

The small village where we lived, I mentioned there were four synagogues. But they were all Orthodox, if you're familiar with the three groupings. And the one we belonged was right behind our house, about 50 yards. But instead, on Sabbath we would come out of the house and go all the way around, about 500 yards to the synagogue. And the men stood straight, and the daughters or the sisters were wiping us and cleaning us and fixing us to go to synagogue.

So life was very Jewish in a sense. That was before. After the Holocaust, I declared myself a Jewish Jew, which is, to me, anyone that wants to be Jewish is my brother, my friend. And so, having lived in Israel and having obtained a teacher's certificate, in addition to my microbiology, I was teaching Hebrew in the United States to all three synagogues.

So at any time, your faith really didn't waiver, even though you're dealing with all these struggles.

She asked if your faith wavered at all during all of what you went through.

No, no, no. I called it luck, or-- no question that only one force could keep us together and alive and--

Thank you. Yes, sir, and then the young lady here.

Oh.

I've read about reparations of property that had been stolen, gold, silver, bank accounts, et cetera, et cetera. And Mr. Solomon, you mentioned that the property that you had in Romania that was in your family for 80 years was simply just taken away from you. Is there any possibility of going after the Romanian government, getting your property back, your house that was taken from your family so many years ago?

The question is, is there any possibility that Haim would have had to go back and get his property back that he lost, his family lost, was taken away from them during the war years in the Holocaust.

1945, the Russians arrived, the camps were opened. Suddenly, there were 400,000 Jews out of 800,000. To this day, the Romanians-- not to this day-- a few years ago declared there was no Holocaust in Romania. And they really cannot account for those 400,000 Jews. Probably, they claim, the Germans took them. Slowly, the Romanians are coming around.

And the position of this museum is not to touch on any forms of reparations. We are very grateful to the fact that they opened up all their archives and all their documents. And as a volunteer, that's what I do twice a week, eight hours a day, translate from Romanian to English documents that were unavailable to any English writer or English-speaking person. And we are grateful for that.

So that condition in Romania and in Ukraine and Belarus and other countries are far from the present concern.

OK. We have a question from the young lady here.

Mr. Solomon, how did you-- how did you survive the Holocaust?

How did he survive the Holocaust? Well, Haim, how would you respond to that?

How do I survive?

Yes.

You sense danger and avoid it. You give up all sorts of pleasures, of meetings, of going places. And you look for the day after-- how could I stay alive? And we did that by spreading out, by bringing back. Brothers slept in the store, which was locked from the outside. We locked them in so Germans or Romanian soldiers, they couldn't imagine that anybody is in there.

You might just share very briefly, Haim, that you went back to Romania recently with your son to your home village. And tell us what you found there.

If you walk across the walkways here, you will find our little village inscribed. And I really wanted to see the school and the synagogue and a few other places. So my oldest son, to whom I used to tell all these stories, wanted to see them. And he arranged our trip to Bivolari, which goes from we arrived in Bucharest, to Iasi, to Bivolari.

We had a taxi and a man. He knows Bivolari because his father lives in the next village north. So he passes it every time he goes there. And when I asked him, where is-- when are we getting there? He says, we are in Bivolari. But there was nothing left in Bivolari, absolutely nothing except the church and a fountain, water fountain. Out of two, three, there is just one. And the populace is-- and the whole city was turned into a pasture for goats and ducks and so on.

I asked him, where did all these houses go? They were demolished. And the river Prut, as it was on the East Side of the village, you were traveling towards the Prut. And about 100 feet before that, there was a sudden drop to the river. And that's where all the village houses were dumped.

Just demolished them and dumped them into the river.

Yes. And the person that we did meet explained to us that anybody that wanted to build his own house could go and pick the things up, like door frames, windows, bricks, whatever. I didn't want to go any further. Just curiosity, where could all the city go?

We're out of time. And so before I turn back to Haim to end our program, I'd like to thank all of you for spending this hour with us and certainly thank Haim for his willingness to share in a short period what obviously would take a very long time to really get many more details about his experience. So we appreciate the opportunity for us to hear from you, Haim, today.

I'd like to-- before I turn back to you, I'd like to remind all of you that we won't have a First Person next Wednesday. But we will have one every Wednesday, except for one Wednesday in August, until August 30. So our next First Person will be on May 3, when our First Person will be Mrs. Susan Taub. Mrs. Taub, who's from Germany, survived the Riga ghetto, the Stutthof and Kaiserwald concentration camps, and a death march before her liberation. So I hope that you can come back on another Wednesday between now and August 30.

It is our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. And so I'm going to turn back to Haim to offer us whatever he'd like to share with us, our closing thoughts. But also, he will remain behind after the program over here by the podium if anybody would like to come and ask a question that you didn't get a chance to ask or just say hi. He'll be here for a while afterwards. So our closing thoughts, Mr. Haim Solomon.

I want to thank you for guiding me through the past, but mostly the audience. There are so many beautiful museums on this wonderful mall, from history to art to-- they even have a spy museum now.

[LAUGHTER]

And you come here to listen, and that's fabulous, gratifying, to just reflect that a country like Germany, progressive and

advanced in music and painting and art and everything, could turn around and descend to such unbelievable depth. It never happened in history. This brings us to present days. We find again the winds of war, as Churchill called them, gathering. And we see how many nations, nationalities have no way, no idea of how to grow up their societies except by preparing them for war.

And they invent enemies. And they invent causes. And they are willing to kill themselves if they could kill the others. 70% of Muslim youth are 25 and under. And they have no way of preparing for a profession, for life, normal and progressive. So we are back into the '30s and the '20s.

I learned a lot about Romania, where I experienced all that Holocaust and all the pogroms. But in my translations, I just started learning what went on before. We need to stop this. And we need to only educate people who cannot be educated because they were directed in another way and try the best we could to institute that proclamation, never again, never, never. Thank you all for coming.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you, Haim.

Thank you.