

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 eighth season of First Person. 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 experiences associated with the Holocaust. Each First Person guest presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum.

With one exception, we will have a first person program every Wednesday until August 29. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a list of upcoming First Person guests under the Public Program section. This 2007 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Dora Smith Foundation, whom we are grateful to for again making this program possible.

Charlene Schiff will share with us her first-person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask Charlene some questions. Before you are introduced to her, I have several requests of you. First, we ask that you try to stay seated in the theater throughout the one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions for Charlene while she'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 hear it, including Charlene, and then she'll respond to your question.

I'd like to also ask you, if you have a pager or a cell phone that hasn't yet been turned off, if you wouldn't mind doing so now. And I'd like to let those of you who may have passes for today's permanent exhibition know that they are good for the entire afternoon. So you can stay with us through our program and still get to the permanent exhibition.

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

What you are about to hear from Charlene Schiff is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Charlene's introduction to you. We begin with this composite photograph of Charlene Schiff's family, her mother, her sister, and her father. Charlene's European name, Shulamit Perlmutter, is on the right side of the screen.

Charlene was born in Poland on December 16, 1929. The arrow points to Poland. She was the youngest of two daughters born to a Jewish family in the town of Horoch³w. The arrow points to the location of Horoch³w. Charlene's father was a professor of philosophy at the University of Lvov. Here we see a contemporary postcard of the University of Lvov. This is a picture of the market square in Horoch³w. Please note that in the background you will see a wooden synagogue.

In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and three weeks later the Soviet Union occupied Eastern Poland, where Charlene's town was located. In 1941, Germany invaded the USSR and set up a ghetto in Horoch³w. When they heard rumors that the ghetto was about to be destroyed, Charlene and her mother fled, hiding in the waters of a nearby river. She became separated from her mother, and Charlene would spend the rest of the war living in hiding in the forests that you will hear a lot more about from Charlene in a short while.

On June 25, 1948, Charlene sailed to the United States on the Marine Fisher, which is featured in this photograph. And we close our slideshow with a contemporary photograph of Charlene standing in front of the steps of her elementary school in Horoch³w. Charlene came to the United States in 1948. Later, she would marry Ed Schiff, who was in the Reserves but was called back to active duty and assigned to Germany. Once Charlene became a US citizen, she joined Ed in Germany. She was an army wife for 28 years.

Today Charlene and Ed live in Northern Virginia. They have one son, Stephen, and two grandsons, ages 15 and 13, both of whom are very sports minded. The 15-year-old is about to become an Eagle Scout, as was his father. Ed, who retired as a colonel, was appointed as an honorary brigadier general and serves as a military aide to Governor Tim Kaine of Virginia, a role that he also served for the previous Virginia Governor, Mark Warner. I'm pleased to say that Ed is with us today. Ed, if you wouldn't mind a little wave. There we go.

[APPLAUSE]

Charlene has been speaking about her Holocaust experience since 1985. Just yesterday, she spoke to two groups here at the museum. And this morning, before coming here for our First Person program, she spoke to the students at Elizabeth Seton High School in Bladensburg, which is very close to Washington D.C. Charlene is a contributor to the museum's publication, Echoes of Memory, which features writings by survivors who have participated in the museum's writing class for survivors. Echoes of Memory is available in the museum's bookstore.

I know you will be interested to know that Charlene, for the past two years, has been visiting wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Hospital on a monthly basis. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Charlene Schiff.

[APPLAUSE]

(WHISPERING) There we go.

(WHISPERING) OK.

(WHISPERING) Almost there. Fine.

Charlene, thank you so much for joining us today and for your willingness to be our First Person. Let's begin with you telling us about your very early life and that of your family's in those years prior to Germany invading Poland. Tell us about your community, your family, and yourself, your life in general before war came to Poland and Europe.

First of all, I want to say good afternoon to my audience. And I do want to thank you, Mr Benson, for your very kind introduction.

Thank you.

My life, my early life in our town, Horoch³w, before the war was actually a very happy life. My family was a small family. It was my father, my mother, my older sister, and I. I Was carefree in those days. But I felt very secure because I had love of my family and also the love of my sister.

My father and my mother were educators. And my father insisted that my sister and I had tutors from the time we were four years of age. At that time, we had to have, I guess, Polish and mathematics, I guess arithmetic, and also a foreign language. At that time, it was German for me.

We spent our time doing wonderful things for the community. My father and mother were both involved and were both civic leaders in our town. Our town was actually in the Eastern part of Poland. And it seemed that before the war, we lived a very harmonious life with the Christians, the Gentiles, in our town.

To give you an example how very involved the entire community was, for instance, my mother and some friends of hers, Jewish ladies, organized summer camps for the poor children in our area. Now, these camps were separate because-- separate for Jews and for Gentiles. The only reason they were separate is because the Jewish children required dietary-- special dietary laws, kashrut. But other than that, they were all the same. And so our community worked hand in hand with the entire population. And we had a pretty harmonious life before the war.

My father was teaching at the University of Lvov, which is a beautiful university. And the picture, the photo that you

saw just recently, just on this screen, was taken only two years ago. The amazing thing is that this university looks the same today as it did before the war. Not one scratch, not one brick is missing. But when I went to look and inquire about my father's tenure at that university now, there was not a sign that my father ever was there and that his presence was quite appreciated by the faculty.

Charlene, tell us a little bit about your sister, Tia. We saw her in one of the photographs.

Yes. My sister Tia was four years older than I. And her Hebrew name was actually T'chiya, which means, I think, reawakening or something new. But anyway, when I was born, I could not pronounce that name, and so she became Tia to everyone.

She was a child prodigy in music. She played the piano and the violin extremely well from the time she was, I guess, I was told, three years old. She actually participated in recitals. And she was used to raise funds in our hometown for-- really, for different purposes. But music was her love.

And actually, after we ended up in the ghetto, she-- I mean, when we had to go into the ghetto, we were told before that to give up all the instruments, playing instrument, musical instruments, and all our dear possessions. We had to give them to the Germans. But my sister refused to part with her violin. Her piano she couldn't take with her. But she did wear a very loose dress, and she brought the violin into the ghetto. And there she helped us, in many ways, in many times, to cheer up some of the people who were so depressed and so sad because of the horrendous situation and conditions in the ghetto.

Charlene, before you tell us more about those conditions in the ghetto, you've described to us those early years as generally a pretty wonderful life. And of course, all of that changed once the Germans and the Russians attacked. And your town fell under Russian domination at first.

In the beginning.

What impact did that have on you and your life?

Well, when the war started, and the eastern part of Poland became under-- became ruled by the Soviet Union because that's the way the agreement between Hitler and Stalin was, that the eastern part went to the Soviet Union. As a child, I don't remember many changes. I'm sure there were many, many changes. But as a child, all I remembered, all I remember now, was the change in the official language.

When this was Poland, obviously the official language was Polish. But when the Soviets came in, the official language became Russian. Now, this was not a big problem in that area. The area that I come from, the borders changed so often that one-- most people were bi or trilingual. And so changing the official language from Polish to Russian was not a big deal.

My sister and I continued with school. And my father still kept his position at the university. But this all changed when the Germans came in.

And when did that happen?

The agreement between Stalin and Hitler was broken in 1941, in the summer. And the Germans actually entered our little town right only a few days after the agreement was broken. And that was ironic in a way because the local populace greeted the Germans with flowers and cheers. But the Jewish world became a horror story right after the Germans came in.

The first thing they did, they rounded up 300 Jewish leaders, took them away, never to be heard from again. My father was among those leaders. Now, how did the Germans know how to zero in on the leaders? Obviously, they got all this information from our neighbors and friends, who turned enemy overnight. It was really very, very sad that these people, with whom we lived in harmony all these years before the war, turned enemy overnight.

Now they took away the 300 leaders. Then they started giving decrees. Every day there were different decrees. First, we had to give up all our gold, all our silver, everything that was precious to us, radios, Persian rugs, paintings. Anything that was of value we had to give to the Germans. They burned all our synagogues, all our Torahs, and all our prayer books.

And I want to mention something about the picture of the wooden synagogue. Sometime in the early 1920s, some visionary here in the United States commissioned a good photographer and sent him to Poland in order to take the pictures of all the wooden synagogues in Poland. They were famous because they were built completely out of wood. Even the nails were wooden. And so there was a book combined with-- I mean formed, that this man took all these pictures together. And there was a book that we didn't know about.

A few years ago, a friend of mine went to Sweden. And he went into a bookshop and looked around. And there he came across the book with all the photographs of the wooden synagogues. He recognized mine because I talked about it. He made a special copy for me. And that's why I have the picture now.

It was burned. Most of these synagogues were destroyed by the Germans. There are few left. But the Germans used them for stables, warehouses. And now they're trying to rebuild them. But I don't know, maybe three or four are left.

That's what I'd heard, just very few that are remarkable historical buildings in their own right.

Yeah. And thanks to the visionary here in the United States, we have the photographs of all the wooden synagogues.

Charlene, take us back to when your father was taken. If I remember right, he did try to get away and wasn't successful. But you talked about what a dignified man he was. Do you remember what you told me about him?

Well, I remember how it happened. We were still in our own house. It was like two or three days after the Germans entered our town. And they went around, the Germans went around with some Ukrainians, with a list of names. They had the list of names of 300 leaders. And when my father saw a group of Germans coming to our house-- our house was on a hill, and it took about a minute or two to walk into it. He tried to escape on the back door. But at the back door, there were Ukrainians who knew who we were. They knew my father, and they wouldn't let him leave.

And then they took him. And my father was a very formal man. He always wore a suit or a jacket. And he was in shirtsleeves, and he wanted to go back to get a jacket. And they wouldn't allow him to go back. And that was the last time I saw my father. We never even said goodbye.

Charlene, did you ever learn what happened to your father?

Well, there are two versions of what happened. One is that he ended up at the concentration camp in Dachau. And the other version is that the 300 men were led outside our town on the same day. They were forced to dig a mass grave. They were forced to undress. And they were murdered right there and then. I don't know which version is the right one.

Charlene, tell us a little bit about your father's library.

My father collected rare books and first editions. And his library was known as one of the finest in the entire area. It seems that, next to his family, my father loved books. And so he collected them for many years.

When the Germans came, and after they rounded up the 300 leaders and took them away, within a week or so later there was a group of Germans who came with a van, parked in front of our house on the street, burst in, and asked where my father's library was. Now, how do they know that my father had a library? Obviously, our former friends and neighbors must have told them.

They came in. And that was the only time they addressed my mother as [GERMAN] frau. Other than that, she was a dirty Jew. But at this time, they gave her the greeting of someone that they respect. They collected all the books. They

put them in the van. And they gave my mother a receipt for it, for the books.

That was just one of the things that the Germans continued to do. And pretty soon after that, everyone 14 years or older was marched to forced labor, slave labor, in the morning and then marched back to the ghetto in the evening. Now, I didn't tell you about the ghetto.

Right after-- I'm not quite sure. It was a week or two after the Germans came in, there was an order. And they would announce the order for all the Jews always to congregate in the market square. Now, the order said to come. Everyone must come, the people who worked and the people who didn't. And those who worked were 14 years or older. But all the children and all the old folks, everyone had to gather in the market place.

And we were allowed to take with us what we could carry. And at the market square, we were told to march. They led us to one of the poorest sections of town. And there we were assigned a space to live. And this is the way the ghetto was established.

The ghetto was completely enclosed. High wooden fences were finished off with barbed wire. There were two gates, guarded 24 hours a day. And one needed a permit, a written permit, to enter or exit the ghetto.

We were ordered to wear a yellow Star of David on the front and on the back of our clothing all the time. Now, the people who worked, which meant these were all people 14 years or older, received a very meager food ration. Children like me received no food at all. My mother and sister shared the little food they received with me.

So your sister was 14.

Yes.

So she was forced to do labor, and thus she was able to get a ration.

Yeah. We ended up-- there was an assigned space to live. It was a house, and I can't remember exactly, but I think it was a two or three-story house. The house had approximately 100 people. And we all shared one very primitive kitchen and one very primitive bathroom. Our space that we were assigned, the room, we shared with three other families. And there was not enough space on the floor to accommodate everyone. And so we had to build-- the older people built bunk beds so that everyone had a space to sleep.

At the--

No, go ahead, Charlene. I'm sorry.

At that time, there was still a lot of chaos, and people were coming and going in the beginning when the ghetto was formed. And so about 20 of us young kids, the ones who were not working, that means the ones who were under 14 years of age, we got together and we built a tunnel. The tunnel was actually starting-- excuse me-- in the ghetto. And it was going under the fences, out. And the other exit was in an old abandoned kiosk. And we camouflaged this. And we took turns trying to get out of the ghetto in order to obtain some food.

Food was very critical to us. There was never enough of it. And this was one way to obtain food. However, if one was caught on the outside without a permit and without the yellow Star of David, one paid with one's life.

I remember one incident, when I-- it was my turn. We took turns, the 20 kids. It was my turn to go outside. And I took a gold and ruby ring, my mother's. And I went through the tunnel outside. I managed to buy two eggs from a peasant for the gold and ruby ring. And I remember I was wearing a dress with puffed sleeves. And so I put an egg in each sleeve, and I tried to walk back, trying to get close to the kiosk entrance. But before I reached it, I was caught.

There was this Ukrainian man, I mean the militia man. He started yelling at me. He found the eggs. He threw them on the sidewalk. He rubbed my face in them. And then he yelled for me to go back where I belong and never to come out

again. I don't know if he knew who I was or he just felt sorry for me, but he was one of the rare, kind-hearted guards. My bloody face healed, and I had my life.

A few days later, a friend of mine used the tunnel and went outside of the ghetto. And she managed to buy a half a loaf of bread. But on the way back, she was caught and murdered. And she was not quite 11 years old. The Germans wouldn't even allow us to bury her. And she was on display on a hill for several days.

Was that the end of using the tunnel after that?

No.

No?

It was not the end of the tunnel, the use of the tunnel because the kiosk, the entrance on the outside was so nicely camouflaged. And--

You called it a-- you told me it was like a work of art, you had done such a remarkable job.

Yeah. And I mean-- and it was-- it still had the roof and the sides, the round walls. So it was a good place to get out. And in the ghetto, I mean, there was so much debris and so much disrepair, the houses were not very-- I mean, not kept very well. So nobody-- if they knew where it was, no one gave away the location. The kids especially didn't. And if the parents or the families knew where that tunnel was, they didn't tell. But, yes, it went on until the end of the ghetto.

Charlene, tell us about the labor that your mother and sister were forced to do. And then at some point, I think you got involved.

Yes. Well, what was happening, my mother was a teacher also by profession. But she was digging ditches and fixing roads. That was her job. Often, she would come home black and blue from beatings she received during work. My sister was actually very lucky. She was assigned a job in a-- they call it a factory, but it was an old warehouse outside the ghetto. And they were knitting articles of clothing for the German soldiers.

One time my sister came home from work quite ill. She had a high fever, and my mother spent the entire night applying potato slices, raw potato slices, on her forehead to bring down the fever. There were no doctors at the ghetto anymore. There was no hospital. And there were no pharmacies. So that was one way to try to remove-- to keep-- I mean, to get the fever down.

Well, my mother was up all night with my sister. I tried to help, but I fell asleep. She didn't. But in the morning, my sister was still not well enough to go to work. And so I tried to persuade my mom to allow me to go and to take my sister's place for that one day. Why? Because food was very critical to us. And if my sister didn't report for work, we wouldn't get the food ration for that day.

I was five years younger than my sister, but I did persuade my mom to allow me to take my sister's place. My sister would always come home from work and tell us how lucky she was, how fortunate because, in that warehouse, the demands were minimal. All the militiamen who guarded them would ask for their name. I mean, in the morning there would be roll call. And as long as you were there, he didn't bother you for the entire day. And then by the time it was time to leave for home, you did get your food ration for that day.

So anyway, I did manage to persuade my mom to allow me to take my sister's place for that one day. In the morning-- I mean, my sister was still sick. We left her in our room, and we walked out. My mother went into her group of the women that worked digging ditches and what have you. And she pointed me to the group where the older girls were gathering.

The older girls took me in, and we marched to the warehouse outside of the ghetto. Most of the work was done outside the ghetto. And there they showed me where my sister's seat was. I sat down. I picked up the two knitting needles. And I

don't remember what she was knitting, but something simple. I think it was a scarf or something.

I was not as efficient as the older girls, but I knew how to knit. Anyway, the militiaman in charge read the names. And when it came to my sister's name, I said present. And that was it. That's the way it started. But my exquisite bad timing was that, on that day, the Germans decided to have an inspection of the knitting factory, as they called it. All of a sudden, there was a lot of commotion. And a group of Germans burst into the warehouse.

They positioned themselves all over the place. One German just stood behind me for a minute or two, watching me quietly. And all of a sudden he kept-- started screaming. [GERMAN], meaning knit faster. And the more he yelled, the slower I was knitting. Finally, he became so exasperated that he jumped in front of my face. And I remember his face was red with rage, and there was foam coming out of his mouth.

He was spitting and cursing and screaming at me. And I was not knitting very efficiently. He was watching for another minute or so. I wished I could have disappeared, but I didn't. And then he pulled the two knitting needles out of my hands and stuck one of them in my right forefinger. I passed out, and that was the end for me.

I don't remember any of this anymore. But apparently the oldest daughters, the older girls, my sister's friends, took care of me. And needless to say, I did not get the food ration for that day. I was told later that I was lucky that the German did not kill me.

My finger became infected. There were no antibiotics or anything like that. And consequently, I lost the tip of my right forefinger. This is just one example of the sadism and brutality of the Germans. These kind of incidents were happening all the time. If we had time, I could stay here for days and tell you more examples of the Germans' brutality and sadism, but this is just one example.

Charlene, before we turn to those extraordinarily terrible times, when you were separated from your mother and your sister, tell us a little bit more about your mother. You described her to me as a magician. And tell us a little bit about her.

Thank you. But, yes, I think all adults, parents, mothers or fathers, or adults became, in one form or another, magicians in the ghetto. My mother could prepare a soup with just one potato and maybe a few string beans. And she would make it so delicious that now, if I ate pheasant under glass, it wouldn't be as good as that soup that my mother prepared.

I don't know-- I know we were very hungry, but that was not enough. I mean, my mother did really magic. She performed magic with so little food and sometimes no salt and, of course, never any meat. But somehow she was able to perform magic. And whenever she came home from work and put that big pot of soup, we just couldn't wait to eat it.

And not only that, but my mother was also used to help others. And most of the people in these ghettos did that. There were many urchins. There were many children who were left without parents, without any adult supervision. And my mother and other women like my mom would take them in and share the little bit of water, the salted water, with these young kids who had nobody and were very hungry.

Not only that, my mother turned gray overnight when my father was taken away. And she put on his jacket, which was very big for her. But she put on that jacket that my father wanted to take with him. And she never parted with it. I remember every day, until I lost my mom, she was wearing my father's jacket.

She was also very optimistic. I know that she didn't feel it. I mean, now that I'm an adult, I think she pretended because she tried to instill hope in my sister and me, hope where there was no hope. When my father was taken away, my mother would come-- I mean, it took her a day or so to get over the shock. But then she would describe what we would eat when we'd have a party when Papa would come home.

She always tried to inject optimism and hope that something better will happen. And that was of great help, even though we were hungry and we were cold and there wasn't sufficient clothing. There was nothing sufficient in those days in the ghetto. But yet, as long as I had my mother and my sister and I knew I was surrounded by caring and loving people, I could have survived. But that didn't happen.

Charlene, part of her hope, of course, was also to think about how to get you out of these circumstances. And that led her to make plans for an escape. Tell us about the events that led up to her planning and then trying to carry out that plan.

Well, the ghetto was always-- there were always rumors in the ghetto. There was no phone. There were no radios. So we-- we all had-- get rumors. And these rumors, most of them were true. My mother worked on the outside. And now and then there would be some information that she would bring home. And so the adults, all of them who were still there, did the same thing.

Well, rumors started flying that the liquidation of the ghetto would be that next-- that summer. That was in 1942. And everyone tried to do something to try to survive. And the only way to survive was to escape from the ghetto.

My mother still had some contacts on the outside. And she was able to get a hold of two farmers. One-- she couldn't find a farmer who would be willing to hide three people. But she found two farmers. One was willing to hide one person, and the other was willing to hide two people. And so now my mother had to make the decision how to divide our little family.

Well, she decided that-- and it was a difficult decision, I'm sure. But my mother decided that my sister, who was five years older than I, could function alone at a farmer, hiding at a farmer's place. And then mother and I would go to the other place when the time was right. I also did not mention something, which maybe is-- I think it's important.

In the early days in the ghetto, my mother and several other women organized a clandestine school, a secret school for children too young to work. That school was held at night after the women came home from work. And they obtained some crayons, books, pencils. We sang songs. And we colored with bits of crayon.

And at that time, my sister was of great help. She would come with her violin. And she would teach us songs. And that was fantastic for us, for the young children, because it took our minds off the horrible hunger we felt all the time.

But anyway, now we are already at the end of the ghetto. And my mother did locate two places, when the time was right, when it was evident that the ghetto would be liquidated. Now when I use the word "liquidation," this is the way the Germans referred to the fact that they would liquidate, they would get rid of, they would kill, murder, all the Jews. Now, rumors started flying that our end was near. And so my mother located these two places. And she waited when to leave.

I didn't also tell you that, at that point or a little earlier, the Germans decided to move us to a new ghetto, a much smaller ghetto because the population dwindled considerably. Now this new ghetto became enclosed, as the old one was, on three sides. But there was-- the fourth side was actually the river that separated our town from a neighboring village. We were lucky to have been assigned a space to live, in a house with other families, right on the river.

And so when the time was right, when it became evident that the liquidation would take place very soon, my mother and my sister got up in the morning. I said goodbye to my terrific big sister, and she-- it was arranged that my sister would go directly from work to the place that my mother secured for her. Two or three days passed, we didn't hear anything from my sister. That meant that she arrived at her destination without any complications and that everything went according to plan.

And so when my mother came home after a few days after my sister left, we ate our meager supper. My mother told me to put on the best clothes and shoes that I had and to take an extra set of clothing with me. She packed a small bundle for herself and one for me. And she started giving me directions, how to get to the farmer's place. But I knew where the farmer lived because, before the war, we used to buy dairy products from him. And one of his daughters actually attended the same school and classes as I did.

And so when it got dark, we didn't even say goodbye to our people who were in the same room with us. But we left the house. And pretty soon we were in the river.

Suddenly, shots rang out. We ducked in the bulrushes and stayed there for quite a while. It was very quiet in between. And any sound would have given us away. And so we stayed there until morning. I was not very nice to my mom at that point, and it bothers me to this day. I kept asking, Mama, why did we go? Why don't we stay? Why didn't we stay in the ghetto?

Well, she said, we are trying to survive. And everything will be fine. But we spent about four or five days standing in the bulrushes and sleeping standing up because, if I would crouch, I would drown. The water would be above my head. Meanwhile, we heard screams and cries coming from the ghetto. There were shots now coming constantly from every direction.

Actually, the next day or two, the second day after we left, other people from the ghetto tried to do the same thing because reaching, going through the river was the only way to leave the ghetto. The rest of the ghetto was still guarded 24 hours a day.

We stayed in the river for about five days. We saw fire and smoke coming from the ghetto. The cries and the screams continued. And there were shots coming from every side, it seems, constantly. One time I dozed off. I don't remember how many days we were in the water at that time. And when I woke up, my mother was nowhere in sight.

I think I didn't move for the rest of that day. And by then, all became quiet. I felt I had to make my way to the farmer's place. And certainly my mother would be waiting there for me. I thought that, perhaps, she tried to wake me when it was time to leave, and she couldn't wake me so she left, hoping I would join her shortly.

Well, I walked all night long before I reached the farmer's place. He wouldn't even invite me to the house. He met me in the barn. He looked at me. And I asked if my mother was there. He told me he had not seen her. And he said, you can stay the day. But when it gets dark, you must leave or else I'd report you to the authorities. I looked at him in disbelief. But he was just shrugging his shoulders. I said, well, you promised my mother to hide us. He just didn't answer. He says, you better go, or I'll report you to the authorities.

Looking strangely out of place on his old coveralls there was his-- my father's gold pocket watch and chain. When night fell, he didn't even bother to come out. His wife came out, gave me a piece of bread and an apple and told me to leave. And that's when my odyssey really starts.

I felt I let my mother down. She probably was waiting for me in the forests. That area of Poland abounds with forests. And so that's where I logically started searching for her. Only what seemed close was usually quite far. It seemed you looked ahead, and there was a forest right nearby. But when one started walking, it seemed much further than the eye would let you know.

It took all night for me to reach the nearest forest. And there I covered myself with leaves and grass and tried to figure out what was going on. The apple and the piece of bread were long gone. Who would take care of me? Where would I sleep? Where would I get food? I had to find my mother.

I was searching for my mother for two full years and three horrible winters. All this time, I was all alone, except for the first two months, when other stragglers from neighboring ghettos and villages and towns came and I met them in the forests. The rest of the time I was completely all alone.

One instance is riveted in my mind forever. That was when I met six other survivors at the edge of a forest. And that was about a month or so after I was on my own. These people and I shared information, where to get food, about other survivors, about the area. Suddenly we were spotted by a group of children from a neighboring village. They looked at us, and they saw that our clothing and all was disheveled. And they knew we were Jews. And so they yelled, Jews, we can see you. And they went back to the village.

We had to hide. And there was no place to hide. That forest had very sparse underbrush. It was harvest time, and there were huge haystacks around. Now the haystacks there were built like barns, long, narrow barns, not like here where we

have them in very tight, round little--

Much smaller here, yeah.

Yes. And so we all ran and hid in one haystack. Why we all hid in one haystack, I don't know. But there was no time to answer that question. We hid in that one haystack. And pretty soon we heard villagers and the kids coming looking for us. It didn't take them very long to zero in on that one haystack.

The villagers came with pitchforks. And they made a game out of it. They were singing and joking and laughing among themselves. And they were stabbing the haystack continually with their pitchforks.

By the time they finished their game, I was the only one left alive. I waited until it became completely dark and quiet. And I worked my way out of the haystack. And there I saw six mutilated bodies lined up in a neat row, their clothes and shoes removed. Obviously, they thought they got us all.

That night I walked all night, and I was still in the same forest. And there was no place to hide because there was no real underbrush. And so I climbed up a tree, and I stayed there the next day, the entire day. And it's a good thing, too, because at that time, there was an awful lot of activity below. Ukrainians or Germans, I don't know. But I hoped all day long that they wouldn't look up because that tree was not really very dense, and they could have located me if they looked up. But lucky for me, they did not.

I had many close calls while in the forests. And my happy life before the war did not prepare me to spend life in the dense, dark forests of Poland. But the will to live is a very strong teacher. And I wanted to live.

My first objective was not to meet any humans because they would either kill me or report me to the authorities, which was the same thing. The second objective was where and how to find food so I wouldn't starve to death. Then there was a problem of going around without a compass. I had to try to orient myself where I was, if I was going north, south, east, west. It was very difficult.

Then there was another problem. The dogs in villages were always anxious to announce my presence by barking loudly or, in some instances, by biting ferociously. That was a problem. Then there was another problem. When the cold weather set in and the snows were heavy, and it was terribly, terribly cold, it was very difficult to survive.

Another problem was how to make a fire without matches. Rubbing two stones together, damp stones, was very difficult. And most of the time it did not produce the expected results.

Out of sheer desperation and indescribable hunger, I started eating insects, worms, and the like. And so my life, my existence, continued. I had many, many close calls. But in spite of all these horrible experiences, I persevered day by day. And I kept one step ahead of death, which was always right behind me.

Charlene, we're very close to the end of the program, and we can't begin to even remotely do justice to having you tell us more about how you were able to survive during that very long time. I noted one time I asked you if you were afraid of wild animals, and you said no. But it was domestic dogs that were your greatest enemy. Tell us, Charlene, having to skip over so much there at the end, how it was that you survived and were found at, for you, the end of the war.

Well, I must add one thing, that animals in the forest-- no animal ever tried to harm me. I don't know, maybe it was because I smelled like them, and I looked like them, and I acted like them. But they were my friends. Or at least they were not my enemies. The only enemies were the dogs in the villages. But I cannot-- I love dogs now. They were protecting their master's property, and they did it because I did not belong in the villages and on the farms.

But the way I survived was that, when I was in the forest, I never knew what time of year or what time of day or night was. I only knew in the winter the snows and the cold, the bitter cold, was absolutely horrible to survive and to conquer. And then in the summer, it was not so cold but it was still damp and dark. Well, when I was in the different forest, I would dig a little grave and camouflage it on the top and stay there as long as hunger allowed me to stay in one place.

At this point, it must have been 1944, when the war turned in our favor. The Soviet Union soldiers were pushing the Germans back. And as it happened, a battalion of Soviet soldiers ended up in the same forest where I was in my little grave, very ill. I must have eaten something that really made me ill, and I was dying.

They came into the same forest. And a group of them was walking around, and they came upon the camouflaged top of my little grave. To their credit and my very good luck, again, they investigated. And they found me in my own filth. They took me out of that little grave. They cleaned me up. And they took me with them and put me in their, what they called a field hospital, which was no more than a tent that they would erect every night, wherever they ended up.

They took me with them. I don't remember any of that because I was so ill. And finally, when we ended up in a city of Luck, they located a local permanent hospital. They took me there and pinned a note on my shirt, saying this is a child of the forest. Treat her gently with great care. And that hospital, they nursed me back to health.

When I became healthy enough to stand on my own two feet, I thanked them profusely and left the hospital. By that time this was the end of war for me. And in Luck, I met the other survivor from my hometown and other survivors from neighboring towns, who congregated there. All of us wanted and hoped we would find other survivors. And so the oldest survivor, the other survivor from my hometown and I decided to go to Horoch³w, to our town, hoping that we would find other family and friends who survived.

There was no organized transportation, so we walked and hitchhiked for about a week before we ended up in Horoch³w. There we were not greeted with open arms. Actually, our former friends and neighbors were disturbed that we came back. They thought that we wanted our homes and our possessions back, the stuff that we left behind when the Germans herded us into the ghetto.

And so it was not safe to be there. And we turned around. We went-- we didn't find any other survivors. We turned around. We went back to Luck. And at that time, the older survivors decided that it was not safe to stay in Poland and directed us to go, of all places, to Germany and Austria. Why? Because Germany and Austria, at that time, were under the regime of the four powers, the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. And so we started making our trip.

Our journey took several months before we ended up in the area of Germany. The reason we were told to leave Poland was it was not safe in Poland. At that time, we had many-- not many, but we had pogroms. All of a sudden, the local people decided that they didn't want the survivor Jews there because they would claim-- that we would claim our possessions and houses and what have you.

And so one of the most infamous pogroms at that time took place in a city by the name of Kielce. 42 Jewish survivors were murdered on a day dear to us in America, the 4th of July, 1946, a year after the war started. So anyway, we ended up in Germany. There the United Nations Rehabilitation and Relief Agency built DP camps for us, displaced persons camps. And that was the first place that we felt safe and welcome.

I had family in the United States, and I wrote to them that I wanted to join them as the only survivor of my family. Soon I did get a reply from my grandmother, who was not alive anymore. But the rest of the family told me they were very glad that I survived. And they sent me an affidavit, which verified the fact that I would not become a burden to the government and consequently to allow me to join them in America. But in spite of all this, I still had to wait three long years before I was able to join my relatives in these wonderful United States.

Charlene, before we close, tell us what, if anything, you were ever able to learn about your mother and your sister.

Well, I learned-- of course, there were two versions about my father. And I don't know which one is the right one. I think it's probably that he is in one of the mass graves. My sister was denounced, and she was walked-- they undressed her. She had to walk the main street naked. And then they murdered her. I never found anything about my mother.

And this is just a small part of the Holocaust. To realize the magnitude, remember or try to realize that, out of 5,000

Jewish people in our town, HorochA³w, there were only two survivors, and one of them stands before you now, or sits and is bearing witness and remembering. The other survivor, my friend, died April 29, 2002.

There are no other survivors in my hometown. So I'm the only one now. And as long as I can, and as long as I still have my marbles together, I would like to keep on telling everyone, especially our young people, how important it is to learn from history, not to repeat the same mistakes that my generation did. Should I read my little--

Let me say one quick thing, and then please do, Charlene. Just would like to thank all of you for being here, remind you that we'll have a First Person program each Wednesday, with exception of one Wednesday, between now and the end of August. We have another First Person program next week, which is Wednesday, May the 2nd. And our First Person will be Mr. Marty Weiss.

Mr. Weiss is from Czechoslovakia, survived the Munkacs ghetto, the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, and the Mauthausen concentration camp. And we hope that you can come back and join us for another First Person on any of those Wednesdays between now and the end of August. It's our tradition here at First Person that our First Person has the last word. And with that, I'd like to turn back to Charlene to close our program.

My plea to you, dear friends, we must continue to fight what I call the four evil I's, the evils of Indifference, Injustice, Intolerance, and Ignorance. These evils are pertinent today as they were 60 years ago. In the '90s, we had Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda. Now we have Darfur, Sudan. Unfortunately, genocide is still with us, and anti-semitism is on the rise.

You, especially you our young people, you are our dearest treasure. You hold the future of the world in your hands. Let us hope that in your generation bigotry and hate will be no more, and you will teach the world to live in peace and harmony, with respect toward all mankind. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you.