

Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. Thank you for joining us. We are in our ninth season of First Person. Our First Person today is Mrs. Katie Altenberg, 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 few exceptions, we will have a First Person program each Wednesday through the 27th of August. We will also have First Person programs on Thursdays in June and July. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a list of the upcoming First Person guests. When you go to the website, click on First Person, and that will take you to the list. This 2008 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Dora Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring First Person.

Katie Altenberg will share her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Katie some questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have several requests for you, and some announcements. First, if possible, please try to stay seated throughout the entire one-hour program. That will minimize any disruptions for Katie as she speaks.

Second, if we have a question and answer period at the end of the program, and you have a question, please make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so all in the room, including Katie, hear the question, and then she'll respond to it.

If you have a pager or a cell phone that has not yet been turned off, we ask that you do so now. I'd also like to let any of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition today, know that they are good for the entire afternoon.

In January, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum announced that it began providing information to Holocaust survivors and their families from the International Tracing Service, or ITS, archive. Located in Germany, the archive was the largest closed Holocaust archive in the world, containing information on approximately 17.5 million victims of the Nazis, both Jews and non-Jews. After years of efforts, the archive has been opened to this museum. The ITS material is being transferred in digital form to the museum in a series of installments, the first of which arrived in August of 2007. More information on the ITS collection can be found on the museum's website, or by visiting the museum's Benjamin and Vladka Meed Registry of Holocaust survivors that is located in the Wexner Learning Center on the second floor of the museum.

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 Katie Altenberg is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Katie's introduction.

And we begin with a photo of Katie Altenberg and her brother Adi taken in 1942. Katie was born in 1936 to Ludwig and Greta Engel in Vienna, Austria. The arrow on this map points to Austria.

Katie's mother, Greta, grew up in Vienna in a family with six sisters and two brothers. And here we see Katie's mother Greta. Greta is pictured in this photo with her sisters. She is third from your right.

Katie's father was born in [PLACE NAME], Hungary. He was one of four children. Here we see Katie's father as a small boy of five with his mother and two sisters.

Katie and her family resided on an estate in the state of Burgenland, bordering Hungary. The arrow on this map of

Austria shows the location of Burgenland.

Katie's father, Ludwig, an agronomist, leased land and built a general farm. We see Katie here on her father's farm in 1937. And Katie is in the pram.

Shortly after German troops invaded Austria in 1938, Katie's father was arrested, but her mother was able to get him released. However, as he had to leave the country immediately, a short time later, the family joined her father on her uncle's estate in Hungary. This map shows Europe and the annexation of Austria by Germany in the Anschluss in 1938. And we'll talk a little bit about that a little bit later.

Eventually, the Engel family was arrested and sent to the Kistarcsa concentration camp outside of Budapest. Katie and Adi were separated from their parents and sent to a children's camp. Eventually, Ludwig escaped Kistarcsa and smuggled Katie and Adi out of the ghetto. They all took refuge in a safe house with their aunt in Budapest, but were eventually sent back to the ghetto. They were liberated by the Russians in 1945.

We see Katie on the left with her brother Adi, and on the right with her parents and two cousins in the fall of 1945.

Katie immigrated to the United States with her family in November 1948. On the left is a photo of Katie with her daughter Karen, son-in-law Bob, and their three children. And on the right, we see Katie's son, Steven, a jazz musician.

After graduation from Syracuse, where she had a full scholarship-- bear with me for a minute-- Katie would become a medical researcher, and was involved in the early research on bone marrow transplants. She would marry a Holocaust survivor, Henry Altenberg, who was in the United States Air Force. Among the places they lived was Japan, where her two children were born.

Eventually, Katie and Henry settled in the Washington, DC area. Katie started a floral design business. Henry, who was born in Berlin, but got to England as a child during the war, passed away in 1983. He is buried at Arlington Cemetery.

Today, Katie lives in Silver Spring, Maryland. Her son Steven is a music professor at the Prins Claus conservatory in the Netherlands, where he teaches American jazz. Karen, who earned an MBA at Lehigh University, and after a period in the corporate world, earned a master's degree in social work. She and her husband live in Chicago and have three children. Katie's three grandchildren are 11, 8, and 5.

Katie retired from her floral design business three years ago. She speaks to groups that visit the museum, including groups of school kids. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our "first person," Mrs. Katie Altenberg.

[APPLAUSE]

That should be good.

Thank you.

[INAUDIBLE].

Katie, thank you so much for joining us, and for being willing to be our "first person" today. Katie, your parents were married in 1934. You were born in 1936. War would not erupt in Europe until 1939. Let's begin today with you telling us what you can about your parents, your community, and you in those years before the war.

OK. My mother moved to Vienna in the early part of the century. Her father was a good business man, very ingenious. And he was living in a small community in Moravia, just a few miles north of Vienna, and was-- organized a cooperative of farmers. And they had no way of getting the produce to market fast enough.

So he went to see the Emperor, Franz Joseph, and said, if you stop the train, the express train from Warsaw to Vienna in

the morning, we'll get you fresh fruit, and vegetables, and produce, and milk, and bread, and so on, the same day, which happened. And eventually, he moved to Vienna and organized a cooperative on a larger scale, and became a commercial advisor to the Emperor.

My father came from Hungary. And his father had a large estate. The estates in Hungary, or in this part of Europe, are large areas, like a couple thousand acres. And they are general farms that have dairy, and horses, and some product. And my father had one of these farms outside of Vienna, about 50 miles, in Burgenland, in the State of Burgenland.

And this was a farm that was-- the land was leased from the Holy Cross order. And everything on it, my father built.

And his main product were longhorns, the white longhorns, for cattle and sugar beets. He had so much sugar beets, and nobody wanted sugar, so he built an alcohol factory and produced alcohol.

We lived on this farm. When my mother got married to my father, they moved to the farm and were in the process of building a new house, because there was not much housing there.

And my grandfather was now older. My grandmother died before the war. And all the children were gone. And he moved into a beautiful, large apartment, just on the main circle of Vienna. It's called District One. And it was such a large apartment that my mother kept an apartment in his apartment so she could run away from the farm, and get to Vienna with her driving.

We were living on this farm, happily, as you saw me in the picture. And the Anschluss came.

Katie, before we move to the Anschluss, let me just ask you a couple of additional questions if I might. You mentioned that your father, who had this very large farm, but he leased it. Why did he lease it?

He leased it from the Holy Cross order because Jews could not own land in Austria.

So his only option was to lease the land.

Right.

He was a very successful farmer. You showed me-- I had the opportunity to visit Katie in her home. And these just amazing prizes and awards that he won, and that Katie's been able to save, from being such a successful farmer and agronomist, if you will.

He also, you mentioned to me, had the opportunity to train other Jews in agricultural techniques. Tell us a little bit about that.

Yes. In the early '30s, there were a lot of young Jewish men who wanted to go to Israel to develop the land. They were called Chutzim. And they would come to our farm for, like, an internship to learn something about farming, because most of them had no idea about the land. Very few Jews were able to live on the land.

I believe in Austria, my father always used to say, there were only five Jewish estates like ours. And two of them-- one was ours, and one was my grandfather. He had another estate in Mailberg, which was leased from another order.

And so these young men would come, and they were trained in basic farming, and then would go on to Israel and work in the kibbutzim, or form them. This was in the early '30s.

| couple of other questions, one related to the farming. You told me that your father had the very first tractor--

Oh, yes.

--in Austria.

Yes. My father loved-- he would be in heaven with the computers today because he loved the newest gadgets going. And we had the first tractor in Austria, which came with a mechanic for a year, to teach everybody how to fix the tractor. Yeah.

Pretty amazing. In your family, you had had-- you had had uncles who had fought in World War II and had died in World World-- World War I, excuse me.

World War I My Uncle Paul, my Uncle Richard, my mother's oldest brother, was a corporal, or some enlisted person in the German army. And they were on the Russian front. And they had to do a reconnaissance mission. And his sergeant was going on this reconnaissance mission.

And my uncle volunteered to take his place, because he had a family and children, and my uncle was single. And he was killed on this mission. None of this helped later on at all.

Katie, as we noted, you were born in 1936. Two years later, the Anschluss took place, in 1938. Tell us what the Anschluss was, and what its meaning-- what its consequences were to your family.

Well, the Anschluss was when the Russians-- I mean, the Germans began to expand and take over countries, the first country was Austria. And the Austrians, of course, loved Hitler. And that is probably better in their killing fields than Hitler himself. And they had open arms, and they were cheering, and flags were flying and so on.

Well, what it meant for the Jews was, more or less, the beginning of Nazism in a big way. And unfortunately, the manager of my father's estate thought that if he got rid of my father, he would get the estate. And so he went to the Gestapo in Eisenstadt, which is the capital of the State of Burgenland, and reported my father. And he was arrested, like, I think maybe April of '38. So right after. They came in March of February.

March, mm-hmm.

And very shortly after.

He was imprisoned for three months, which I just found out recently. And my mother was able to-- various bribes and so on. And basically, the community, probably the Holy Cross order, who they were very friendly with, helped in getting him out. However, the Gestapo took the car, took the money out of all the bank accounts, and took everything. And my father was advised to leave the country immediately.

So one of his employees, in a hay wagon full of hay, drove him across the border to Hungary. Our place was not very far from Hungary. And he went to his brother's estate, which was in Hungary.

My mother packed up the house and put most of it in storage, and a few pieces of jewelry she gave to some of the housekeepers and so on for safekeeping, and took my brother and I, who we were one and two, and went to join my father.

And this photograph of-- my earliest photograph, is on this estate with my uncle and aunt. And basically, we were there on this estate until-- I'm not-- the timing, I'm not sure about. But probably till the end of '43 or towards the end, when we moved into a little village house on the edge of town hoping to be inconspicuous.

But one night, the Gestapo knocks on the door. Actually, it's the Hungarian Gestapo, called the Nyilas, and in English, Arrow Cross. And they-- two bayoneted soldiers came and said, pack up. In a half an hour, we're taking the train to Budapest.

Katie, before we turn back to that, that occurred in 1942, I believe.

'42, end of '42--

Between '38 and '42, you said it was a relative-- despite your father's arrest, he was released, you went to Hungary-- it was a relatively normal time. But one of the phrases you used with me was, it was the worst of times, it was the best of times of times.

The best of times.

If you don't mind saying just a little bit more about that.

Well, we lived on this farm. And of course I'm very little. And I played with the children on the estate. There were maybe, I don't know, maybe 30, 40 families living on the estate. And we had good times.

And next, at the end of our house, or my aunt's house, was a door into the garden. And this was a beautiful garden of maybe an acre or two, with orchards and everything you could imagine-- vegetables, fruits, so on.

And as you walked out, there was a, next to us, actually attached to our building, was the Catholic Church. And this was the back of the Catholic Church. And there was a little window. And we used to climb up there and watch what was going on. And that was a fun time.

Then, of course, things got worse. And I was not aware of it, but my parents, and my aunts and uncles, and cousins, and everyone was very nervous, and agitated, and so on.

We didn't know what was going on. We were too little, and they tried to protect us. But it was getting very uncomfortable.

And at this point you couldn't leave anymore. And so we tried to, as I said, we moved to this little house at the edge of the village hoping to be inconspicuous.

And then the Arrow Cross comes to your door.

Yes.

Tell us what the Arrow Cross was.

Well, they were the Hungarian version of the Gestapo, and they were all both in Austria, and in Hungary, they wanted to outdo the Gestapo. So they were just awful.

I read, Katie, that the Arrow Cross, in its short period of time that it was in charge, outright murdered between 10,000 and 15,000 Jews and deported another 80,000 to their deaths.

Right. Our luck, so to speak, was that we were arrested early because we were foreigners. We were Austrians in Hungary at this point.

So that was the charge against you?

That was the charge. And our relatives were not arrested, but were deported in 1944, and none of them survived-- not a one. Only the young people who ran off or joined the army and the opposition army, the Allied armies, survived. But none of my uncles, aunts, cousins, et cetera.

Now we're on a train to Budapest. And it seems like forever. Actually, the distances are not very long, and maybe three, four hours from Budapest to-- from where we were to Budapest. Not even.

We are put in the national prison in Budapest, called [PLACE NAME]. It turned out, when I went back to look for it, nobody remembered where it was or what it was. So eventually, I found out that it must have been the prison where they

hold prisoners before trial, above the court-- in the courthouse. So it was under the courthouse, right in the middle of the city.

We were there for I don't know how long-- not very long-- and were then taken to Kistarcsa, which was about 35, 40 miles out of Budapest. Up till this point, it was a political prisoner camp. Eventually, they brought all the Jews there, or many Jews there. And it was a staging area for the trains to the death camps.

And we were there, my mother and my brother and I in one place. We were in a huge dormitory, I remember, with lots of cots. But there were no mattresses. They're just wire cots. And we were there. And my father was in a different place.

Eventually, they made an announcement that if you were under, I believe, 12, but I'm not positive, and you had relatives in the city, you could be sent to your relative.

Just the children.

Just the children, under 12. And my brother and I were, at this point-- how old were we? Let's see. '43, '42. So I was six years old. And so they let us go to my aunt. And my aunt had a lovely apartment overlooking the Danube, very close to the parliament, if any of you have been to Budapest.

And in the beginning, things-- we worried about my parents, of course, but we had a relatively quiet time. I remember some nice things-- walking along the Danube every morning. And we had a routine of in the afternoon there was a Hungarian-- it's called a konditorei, or in German also, a pastry shop. And we would go there every day and get chestnut slices. That was my favorite. I still dream about chestnuts and buy them whenever they are available.

And we lived in this apartment building. In front of the building was a small park called Saint Stephen's Park. And we used to play there. We didn't have any toys, but somehow we had foil from chocolate. So I guess chocolates were still around. And we would make balls out of putting layers and layers of chocolates. It took a long time to get these things going.

And eventually my father would appear. Well, my father did two things very well. He played chess, and he knew how to escape things. So periodically, he would escape this Kistarcsa camp and would appear on false papers.

Also my father played very well chess. And the man who made the list for deportations was a big chess player, and my father used to play chess for his life. Every time he won, his name would move one notch back.

And so-- plus he kept escaping. Eventually he'd get caught, sent back. Escaped again. But he would show up periodically.

And I remember one day he was in my-- we were in the apartment. And now things were really serious. First of all, there was a war going on in Budapest. The Russians were coming to one side, and the Germans were leaving on the other side. And things got very bad. I saw one of the main bridges blown up by the Germans in the middle of the morning, with all the traffic on it, and all sorts of people. And it was a terrible disaster. They were blowing up the bridges so the Russians couldn't use them.

Katie, I'm going to stop you for just a minute just to ask a couple of quick questions. Your father would appear from time to time. Did you know anything about your mother's circumstances?

No, my mother-- we didn't know where she was. After the war, we found out that she volunteered for a labor camp, because she figured-- it was a farming camp-- that if she was working on the land she'd be able to eat, which she did.

Also tell us a little bit about your aunt. You were in her apartment.

Oh, yes.

Yeah, share that with us.

My aunt, her name was Risa. Risa Nã©ni. Nã©ni is aunt in Hungarian. And she lived in this apartment.

And she was not a very efficient caregiver, so to speak, or caretaker of the place. She always had a staff, even though it was a very small apartment, relatively speaking, probably no more than 1,200 square feet. She always had somebody working there.

But at this point, her daughter was gone, her husband was gone. And now, when I think back at it, she must have been very agitated and very upset, because she didn't know where her daughter was. She didn't know what happened to her husband-- who was killed, actually, immediately.

And so we were living in this apartment. And I remember, I was the chef, the six-year-old chef. And when I think about my granddaughter, who is little, I would have had a heart attack if I'd caught her.

I got a chair, and pulled it up to the stove, and I made French-fried potatoes, with hot oil and all. And the other thing I knew how to make was baked beans, or really sweet sour beans cooked on top of the stove. So that's what we ate.

And eventually, this apartment started getting very crowded. People were moving in left and right. And we were, like, I don't know, about 60 people in this place. And I didn't understand what was going on, and with my friends in the building. We always were sitting on the stairwell because there was no room to sit anywhere.

And later on, many years later, I was at a conference where Annette Lantos-- Senator-- Congressman Lantos's wife, he just died. You might have heard about it in the news-- was telling his story. He was a survivor from Budapest. And he's about, I don't know, eight years older than I am, or 10 years older.

And he turns out he was a neighbor. He lived two houses from where I lived. So I learned a lot about my experience from his story.

And it was a protected house, a diplomatic house. So people were moving in to be protected. And these houses, all on this park, were all protected houses. So people were coming there from other places.

At some point, and maybe it came later, your father worked to try to arrange a Kindertransport. Will you tell us about that?

Yes. My father wanted us out of there, of course, and he wanted us to go to Israel, because he had a sister. One of his sisters lived in Israel. Her name was-- married to a Professor Broyer, who eventually-- not eventually-- earlier. In 1919 he started the Technion, which is the MIT of Israel, basically.

And he was a civil engineer. He was in the First World War. And they treated him-- so he was an officer on the Italian frontier. And they said something nasty about Jews. And he said, I'm leaving. You can keep this war. And he went to Israel and started working as a civil engineer. I'm sorry.

You're going to tell us about your-- your father's making the arrangements to try to get you to Israel.

Oh, yes. So he bought a space on a Kindertransport that was going to Israel. And it was-- I don't know who sponsored it. Possibly the Americans. I don't know. Anyway, I got chickenpox, and my aunt decided that my five-year-old brother couldn't go without me. Like, I could take care of him.

And so she contaminated him. And we were so sick, we ended up having to go to the hospital. And we were in a bombed-out hospital. And this Kindertransport never made it. It got blown up. They were on a ship and got blown up. So that was another survival incident.

We were now in the hospital. And it must have been a Jewish hospital of some sort, camp hospital, something. And I

think they transported us-- that whole hospital was evacuated into the ghetto. I think that was my first trip to the ghetto. And we're walking with satchels, and mostly young kids, kids under 12, I think it was. And we're walking six deep with bayoneted soldiers along the way.

And I see my father on a street corner.

As you're walking by, right?

As we're walking by. And somehow, I guess you're so primed to the situations, without knowing why or wherefore, you just don't say anything. And we go into the ghetto. And we're in this-- it's early on in the ghetto. I think the Budapest Ghetto started in early '44.

And it must have been about that time. And we're in these empty buildings. And they take us to an apartment building. And there's nothing in there. And it's evening, nighttime, dark. And we're sitting lined up along the edge of the walls of the rooms. And there are about 600 of us.

All kids.

All kids, all little kids. And we're in this room. And everybody's scared. And I think there are some of the hospital workers with us and whatnot, trying to calm us down. And next thing I know, there is my father with a flashlight looking for us. And he takes us and gets us out of the ghetto. We get to the gate, which is a 10-foot fence with a door.

And the guard at the gate says to my brother, who is this man? And he says, it's a friend of my father's. I don't know how you know to say things and what, but that's what he did. And my father bribed him, and he had false papers, and we got out.

And we went back to the apartment of my aunt. And of course now it's very full. And I'm sleeping in the bay-- all along I was always in the bay window, on the cushion. So I'm really little.

And watching out the window, we see all these people being collected down there. And we don't really-- maybe, actually, that was even before. And we don't know what's going on. And these are people who are being either taken to the railway station and deported, or into the ghetto.

Well, eventually, our protection doesn't help either. And we're down there. And we are marched off to the ghetto. And in preparation, my father manages to find a vendor's pushcart. And he loads it up with suitcases.

And we're-- I don't-- we're walking. It's about, I would guess, maybe a 2-mile walk to the ghetto. And we're walking and walking. And they're bayoneted soldiers taking us. And there are a lot of old people, because the young ones left, and only young ones, very young ones and old ones.

And at this point, my father is 44 years old. My aunt is 15 years or 10 years older. And we're marching into the ghetto. And if somebody stumbles, or falls, or drops something, they kill them right there on the spot, take off the rings, take out the teeth. I mean, it was gruesome.

And Katie, you remember that.

I remember that. And I try not to think about it. And it's in the back of my head. But when I visualize myself as a child there, I lose it. So I try not to think about it. Otherwise, I'd break down, and I wouldn't continue.

We're in the ghetto, and we end up on the top floor of an apartment building, which is probably the sixth floor. Most of the buildings in Budapest are about six stories, five stories. And we end up in the top floor in a corner.

And you've hauled these suitcases--

All these suitcases.

--all the way up--

My father had to make several trips. And I'm wondering what's in all these suitcases. I'm thinking people are carrying their clothing and so on.

Well, my aunt is hugging a coffee grinder. And we're ending up-- and these suitcases are full of legumes, dried legumes-- beans, peas, soy beans, et cetera. And my coffee grind-- my aunt's coffee grinder is making flour. And so we make noodles out of these, and boil them, and whatever. 100 ways of doing it. And we were able to have food. There was no food in the ghetto.

The buildings are built around courtyards, around the edge of the square block, and with the open space in the middle. And in this courtyard was a soup kitchen for children. And you would get a half a slice of bread, about that thick, that was like soap. I have no idea what they made it out of, because you couldn't eat it. And we were very fortunate to have this food and survive.

The other problem was that the war is still continuing. And earlier, we were watching from the window. And every time a bomb fell into the river we would cheer. Didn't fall on us. Now we're in the ghetto, the war is at its end, more or less. It's now winter of '44. The Russians get there in '45, early. And the bombs are falling all the time.

And we have these air raids in the city. So you got to run downstairs. Now we're on the sixth floor. We're going into the basement. Five floors, and the basement is another floor-- so six flights-- and up. And this is three, four times a day.

And after a few days, very few days, we decide, that's it. Whatever happens happens. We're not going down there anymore.

And that day, the next day, a bomb fell into the stairwell and killed everybody in the basement. And we're stuck upstairs. We can't even get out. And it took a day or two to get planks and somehow get us out of there.

So that was another major trauma. And you knew these people, and you've been with them for quite a few months. And it was just shocking.

Katie, in March 1945, as you mentioned a moment ago, the Russians would liberate Budapest.

Budapest, yes.

Tell us-- tell us how your father and mother reunited, as they did, and what circumstances were like for you. The war is over for you, but it's a war-torn city--

Right.

--and you're struggling to figure out what next.

Right. We went back to the apartment, my aunt's apartment. And my father went searching for my mother. And he eventually found out that she had been very sick, and was in a hospital on the other side of the city, and went searching for her.

On the bridge, one of the bridges that didn't get blown up, he was walking, and he passed her. She was walking. Two girls were walking with her, practically carrying her because she was so weak and so thin.

He passed her and didn't recognize her. But they overheard them talking, and recognized her voice. And that's how they were reunited.

And he brought her home. She was at least three or four months in bed recovering. And how she survived was, as I mentioned before, she was on this labor camp. And somehow she managed to get herself into a hospital there when she got sick, which was probably a year or so before.

In the hospital turned out to be-- the director of the hospital or the owner of the hospital-- I'm not sure-- was a-- Esterházy is the name. And that's a very famous royal name in Hungary. And he was the relative of my father's neighbor, next-door neighbor, where we had the estate, and he protected her. And because first the-- the Germans came, took all the patients, dumped them in the river, and then the Russian-- and put their patients in. And then the Russians came and did the-- dumped the Germans in the river and put their patients in.

And through this whole event, somehow my mother managed to survive. And she later told us how she was lying in bed watching the bullets go over her head, because the battle was so severe there.

Now we're back in Budapest, all of us. And when my mother is able to travel, we go back to Hungary, to my uncle's estate, and wait for people to return. And nobody's coming. Nobody came back.

Eventually, my cousin Victor, from Moravia, from one of my mother's sisters, shows up on a motorcycle. He's about-- what? I think he's born in maybe 1919 or 1921. So, I don't know. He's pretty young at the time. And he comes riding up in a motorcycle. And he says, nobody came back to my house.

Oh, I have to add something to it. When we came back to this estate, it was harvest time, about August or so, July, August. And big haystacks are already-- and straw stacks. And the farm is functioning somewhat. And the people living, there the peasants and the manager and so on, they're all very upset that we came back. So they put--

But wait a minute. Before this happens-- oh, the Russians, first, before this, the Russians come and bivouac on the estate. They're on their way to wherever, coming from wherever. And they are very, very primitive people, most of them. I mean, the enlisted people are really peasants from the-- I think from the eastern part of Russia.

And all they are interested in is chasy, chasy. Chasy are watches, clocks, anything that ticks. They have never had them before, apparently. And the other, the second major item, is alcohol. Perfume, anything that has any alcohol in it, they drink.

And that-- and so they're on the estate, and at this point, my father, maybe even before they arrive--

He goes to Vienna, right?

He goes to Vienna to look at what's left on the estate. And of course, he only-- he doesn't own the land. He only owns what's on the estate. And other than a few barns, which haven't been burned down or whatever, there's nothing there.

And so he goes to the Holy Cross and talks with them and so on. And they beg him to please come back and use the estate again, and so on. And he says, no, he couldn't possibly stay in a country like this.

So very little remains of the storage stuff, and the few prizes that nobody wanted remained in the storage. And I have a couple of pieces of furniture. And that's about it. A few of the employees returned some of the jewelry and some did not. So that's it. And he never wants to see Austria again.

And he comes back. And then we have this problem with the Russians. But while he's gone, they come into the office, and my mother has somehow managed to get a watch. I think somewhere it was hidden, or I don't know how she had it. And one of them comes and steals it.

And she is so angry and so ferocious. My mother was very little, 5 foot 1, basically, at her maximum height. But a real spitfire.

And she went to the officers and said, I didn't survive all this hell to have you come and rob me. And so she got all her

stuff back, and we had a guard on the door, so on. Anyway, they moved on shortly.

And then the natives torch the place. They put a torch to the haystacks, and the wind blew. And they had basically-- the fire department was a bucket brigade, which didn't do anything for it. And pretty much the whole village burned down. Our house did not burn, the church didn't burn, and the school didn't burn because they were more solid buildings.

But the peasant houses were all thatched roofed, like in 1850, dirt floors, thatch roof, two-room cottages. And the whole place burned down.

And that's when my cousin appeared. And he says, why do you want to stay here? Come to my house. Nobody came back, and I have this big house, and it's empty. So we went to--

I might just add here that your cousin Victor, when you described him to me, he sounds like an amazingly dashing man.

Yes.

He'd somehow been able to volunteer, join the British army--

Yes.

--served in the Middle East with another cousin. He's a war veteran now. He rides up on a motorcycle, takes you all off with him.

Right. They, all these young cousins who were in their early 20s, joined the Czech--

Czech Brigade?

The British Army Czech Brigade. And they worked mostly in the Middle East, in Abadan, and Iraq, Iran, where the British had their oil fields and so on.

So we go to Moravia. And his father had a large hardware store, which was at the bottom floor of the building. And we lived upstairs on a big-- on the main square.

And we were there for a while. And my father was-- and waiting for others to come. So the second photograph, where you'll see my cousins in the picture, one of them was my tante, my cousin, a distant cousin, Marta, who survived Dachau, and escaped Dachau by hanging on the bottom of one of the trains as they were leaving. And she survived that. And the other cousin was my cousin Victor.

And we were there for, I don't know, less than a year. But I started school, third grade, and made a very good friend who I was in touch with recently.

And my father was miserable. And another Jewish fellow appeared on our doorsteps, a Mr. Green. And he said, I have this big estate in-- well, at that time-- no, it was Slovakia. And he says, I have no idea what to do with it. None of my relatives returned. And I need somebody to run it. Would you run it for me?

So we're waiting. We made an application to come to the United States. And we're waiting for papers. We were waiting before the war for papers. And now we're waiting again for papers.

So my father, he says, yes. And we moved to this awful town in Slovakia. And it's a big estate. And he starts making money right away. I mean, we start production.

And it was a fun time for me on the estate, because I remember, for example, when I go by a bakery, and I smell bread baking, it reminds me, in the harvest time we would have 40, 50 extra men to bring in the harvest. And they would always hire a cook and a baker. And the baker would-- the ovens were out in the yard, and they would make loaves of

bread this big, this thick, that delicious rye bread. I mean, a solid rye bread. And they would bake it on cornmeal, roughly ground cornmeal. And it would smell heavenly.

And the men, I remember, they would slice the bread with this huge knife, big slices. And there would be always bacon hanging. And they would cut a chunk of bacon. And that would be their lunch. So that was kind of fun.

Katie, in the remaining time we have, and we'll wrap up in a little bit. But a couple of things. One, you said that while you were there in Slovakia, that for you as a child is a good thing, but there were terrifying thunderstorms.

Yes. Yes. I managed somehow to get to a summer camp. And it's probably some Jewish Agency arranged for that. And we would go up into the mountains. And it must have been a hotel once or something, a beautiful, big yellow building in the top of a mountain.

And there were kids from age-- we were the littlest ones. And there were kids up to probably 17, 18. They were our counselors.

And these huge thunderstorms would come up in the mountain. And I remember, we were so scared, because it reminded us of all the terrible bombings and so on.

You said, you'd get under the covers and say, it's not bombs, it's not bombs.

Right, and would talk to myself all the time, telling myself, don't worry.

And for years-- this is an aside-- in America, when I ever hear a siren or a police car, I would say to myself, I didn't do anything wrong. They're not coming for me. And yeah, that took years.

Katie, we won't have the time to talk about what it was like for you when you came to the United States, and how you built a new life-- your parents did and you did. But tell us about how you got to the United States, beginning with your visa and that, and just a little bit about the trip.

OK. It took us three years to come. And we came on a speedy visa, preferential visa, for rabbis and agriculturists. And I guess the country needed farmers, and so we came a year or two faster than other people. It took very long time.

1948.

1948, November. We arrived November 6, as a matter of fact.

We had money already on the farm. We made money. But you couldn't bring anything out. So we left the money to HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Society, I believe. And they paid our way to come to New York.

And we got-- we came with Sabena Airline, Prague, Brussels, Dublin, Saint John, New York. And everywhere it was raining. Everywhere we got breakfast. And everywhere we had engine trouble.

And we were on a DC-6, flying at about 10,000, 11,000 feet. And when we were across middle of the Atlantic, the pilot gets on, and he says, we're in a terrible snowstorm. We're icing over. We're barely moving at full throttle. Should we go forward or should we go back?

And he says this to the passengers.

Said to us. And the rabbis all got caught up in the aisle and started praying. [LAUGHTER] And we're all yelling forward, forward, forward. And I swear, the plane went. [LAUGHTER] And it was terrible. I was seasick, airsick, whatever the whole time. I said, leave me alone, leave me alone.

And of course, it was raining everywhere, or freezing. Or up in north it was freezing. And everywhere-- Saint John was

just a shack. And we had to wait there for hours. I don't know how long this trip took. Forever.

But once we came over to the US, it was sunny and nice. And my mother kept saying, look out, look out. Look how beautiful it is. Look at the trees. Look. And I said, ugh! Anyway.

You do remember, though, being really impressed by your cab ride into New York City.

Yes. When we came to Manhattan, I mean those high rises. It's like unimaginable for anyone, because I never saw a building more than four, six stories high, except for the top of the parliament or something like that. So when you see those skyscrapers in New York that was the most amazing thing that I can remember. That was unbelievable.

And we were in New York for about a month. And my big event in New York was, first of all, I couldn't speak a word of English. But in New York, you don't have to know English. You can always find somebody who speaks something else.

And I remember, they stuck us in a class where we were cutting out first grade pictures of Jill and--

Jack?

Jack and Jill went up the hill, and that sort of thing. And we were pretty annoyed with that.

[LAUGHTER]

And we went to-- we went to some special English classes. And I don't really remember school except the Jack and Jill bit.

But what I do remember is that Mayor O'Dwyer of New York either was running for re-election, or just got re-elected, or something. And we were in a newsreel commercial for UNRRA-- United Nations Relief fund, these big trucks taking food to the airport, I guess, or to the ships, whatever.

But we-- my brother and I and Mayor O'Dwyer were in this huge truck, or getting up into a truck. And I am trying to figure out how to get that newsreel, because I would really love it for my kids.

Katie, eventually, of course, you would-- your family would move. Your father, through tremendous effort, would find a little farm in rural New York and begin his agricultural life again. And eventually you would complete school. And not only would you complete school, but Katie would become class valedictorian in her high school, and her brother would be right behind her as the number-two person in the school, and then, as I mentioned earlier, would go on to become a medical researcher and build a new life.

I wish we had time to go into a lot more of that. Katie will stay behind for a little while, will be able to. So if you'd like to meet her, ask her some questions, when we come down off the stage here, Katie will be over there by the podium.

We're going to hear from Katie again in just a moment. I'd like to first thank all of you for being here. Thank you very much. And particularly I want to thank Katie for her willingness to be our "first person."

I'd like to remind you that we will have a First Person nearly every Wednesday until the 27th of August, as well as Thursdays in June and July. We will have another First Person program next Wednesday, which is April 9, and our "First Person" will be Mrs. Ruth Greifer, who is from Germany. And she spent the war in hiding in the Netherlands. So we hope you'll come back and join us if, at all possible, again this year. Or look, when you plan to come to Washington, DC next year between March and August, think about a Wednesday, because that's when we're here.

It's our tradition at First Person that our "first person" always has the last word. And with that, I'd like to turn back to Katie to close our program.

First of all, I also want to-- thank you for listening. And I want to tell you that I'm very grateful for this country, and I'm very patriotic, and I'm very protective of the US. I don't let anything pass without making a comment if somebody is knocking it. That's really-- and because also of my background, I have become a news junkie. And I am very sensitive to all sorts of prejudice, and persecution, or anything. My antennae are up.

And my second main thing about the US that I love is how it's able to turn around and right things. In Europe, everything takes hundreds of years. And I'm thrilled to see the United Nations of Europe sort of forming, finally, after generations and generations. But here in the US, when the public gets behind something, and the media follows-- always follows, unfortunately-- how we are able to turn around.

For example, in my generation, everybody smoked. I was always the outcast for not smoking. Now nobody smokes in my generation. Even in my kids' generation, very few people smoke. And I hope you young people will be smart enough not to start it, because it's such a disaster.

But I was, in the last 40, 50 years, I remember so many things have happened. I was at the university. And one of my dorm mates was dating-- she was a blond southerner dating a Black fellow. And it was, like, awful. And people were ostracizing. Her parents disowned her. His parents disowned him. And it was just a disaster.

And I was walking down on the mall on Sunday. And it's, like, tossed salad. [LAUGHTER] I mean, it's so mixed up. We're going to have a beautiful country. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]