

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. We are in our ninth season of first person. Thank you for joining us. Our First Person today is Mrs. Charlene Schiff, whom we shall meet shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience 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 August 27. We will also have First Person on each Tuesday and Wednesday in the months of 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. Just go to the website and click on First Person.

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.

Charlene Schiff will share with us 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 Charlene some questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have several requests of you, and a couple of announcements. First, if possible, we ask that you stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That way we will minimize any disruptions for Charlene while she speaks.

Second, if you do have a question in our question and answer period, please make your question as brief as possible. I will repeat the question so everyone in the room, including Charlene, can hear it, and then she'll answer your question.

If you have a cell phone or a pager that has not yet been turned off, we'd like you to do that now, if you would. If you have a pass for the permanent exhibition today, please know they are good for the balance of the afternoon.

In January, the United States 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 effort, the archive has been opened to the 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 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 this building.

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.

And we begin with this composite portrait of Charlene Schiff's family-- her mother, her sister, and her father. Charlene's European name, Shulamit Perlmutter, is on the right of the screen. Charlene was born in Poland on December 16, 1929. The arrow on this map of Europe points to Poland.

Charlene was the youngest of two daughters born to a Jewish family in the town of Horochow. The arrow points to the location of Horochow.

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 Horochow. Note the wooden synagogue in the background. And I think we'll hear more about this from Charlene later in our program.

In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and three weeks later, the Soviet Union occupied eastern Poland, where Charlene's town was located. Under Soviet rule, Charlene's life did not change a great deal. The most important change she remembered was having to speak Russian in school.

In 1941, Germany invaded the USSR and set up a ghetto in Horochow. When they heard rumors that the ghetto was about to be destroyed, Charlene and her mother fled. They hid submerged in the waters of a nearby river as machine gun fire rang out from the ghetto.

For several days, Charlene and her mother stayed in the water. Charlene then lost her mother, and unable to find her, Charlene would spend the rest of the war living in the forest.

On June 26, 1948, Charlene sailed to the United States on the Marine Flasher, which is featured in this photograph.

And here we close the slideshow with a contemporary photograph of Charlene standing in front of the steps to her elementary school in Horochow.

Charlene came to the United States, as I mentioned, 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, Steven, a surgeon, and two grandsons, ages 16 and 14, both of whom are very sports minded. And the 16-year-old will become an Eagle Scout in June, as was his father.

Ed, who retired as a colonel, was appointed as an honorary brigadier general and serves as a military aide to Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, a role that he has served for the previous Virginia Governor, Mark Warner. And I'm pleased to let you know that Ed is with us today. Ed, if you wouldn't mind letting people know you're here.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you.

Charlene has been speaking about her Holocaust experience since 1985. She speaks very often in all kinds of settings. For example, just recently she spoke at a middle school in Chantilly, Virginia that annually celebrates-- and this is really kind of neat-- celebrates a Greatest Generation Day, in celebration of the Tom Brokaw's Greatest Generation. And Charlene was a featured speaker at the Greatest Generation Day at this school. She's recently spoken at American University and Georgetown University.

Charlene is a contributor to the museum's publication, Echoes of Memory, which features writings by survivors who participate in the museum's writing class for survivors. And after the program today, Charlene will sign copies of Echoes which will be outside our doors up the steps.

And I know you will also be very interested to know that for the past three years, Charlene 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]

Forward just a little bit. [INAUDIBLE].

OK.

Charlene, welcome, and thank you for joining us and your willingness to be our "first person" today. Let's begin today, Charlene, with you telling us about the first 10 years of your life, before war broke out, and what life was like for you in your community, with your family, and for yourself in those early years.

First of all, good afternoon. Welcome. And I'm glad to see so many wonderful people here. Thank you for giving me your time.

Now to answer your question. It is actually a very simple story. My life before the war was, I would call it, idyllic.

We lived in a small town in Poland. It was Poland at that time. Our family was a small family-- my father, my mother, and my sister, who was five years older, and who was actually a musical prodigy.

We lived a very simple life, but a lovely life. It seems that in our town, everyone tried to concentrate on helping one another. And we, the Jews and the Christians, lived in great harmony with respect towards one another.

The reason this was so was because we decided-- when I say "we," meaning the adults, that it's much easier to live in harmony in peace than in antagonism and in hate. It seems, for instance, my mother used to organize-- she and a few of her friends-- they used to organize summer camps for poor children. Now there were summer camps for Jewish children, and summer camps for Christian children. They were separate because of the dietary laws for the Jewish children. But other than that, they were the very same.

And I know many times I've been asked, or often, was there any antisemitism that I knew about? Well, I'm sorry to say this-- or I'm glad to say this. I have not seen any antisemitism in Horochow. It seems we all got along beautifully, and we lived together with respect for one another.

My life was filled with friends, with activities in our home. Our home was open to many wonderful activities, fundraisers, poetry reading, other meetings that all had the same goal-- to make life better for the entire community in Horochow.

My father was teaching. He was a full professor of philosophy in Lvov. Many of his colleagues lived in Horochow because it was much less expensive to live in a small town than to live in Lvov. Lvov was only about 20 or 30 miles away from Horochow.

Now until the war started, my life was, I would call it, uneventful, but filled with love, many friends, and good times in school. My sister was so good in playing the violin and the piano that many times she was asked to participate in fundraisers. And that was a very interesting undertaking.

My father, now and then-- my mother was also a teacher, but she stayed home to take care of her two young daughters. My father now and then would give us a special treat of taking my sister or me to Lvov while he was teaching. And that was a very wonderful activity for my sister and me. He never took us together, but he took us especially just one for the time. And we felt very blessed and very special when we went with our father to the university.

I was amazed that the university looks the same now after the war as I remember it before the war. But the postcard that was shown here was actually a photo that was taken in 2006 when we were there. Now I don't want to go anymore, because I know time is restricted.

Given that, Charlene, of course, this-- oh, sorry.

Excuse me, I just want to say one more thing. I want to tell you that I spent many years asking myself, why did I survive? And my answer is, I mean, I don't have an answer why. I wasn't any smarter, I wasn't any better. I was lucky.

But since I survived, I feel it's my obligation, my duty to speak and to bear witness to honor the memory of the millions who never had their voice, who never had a choice. I lived in a world that I loved, a Jewish world. And that world received a death sentence only because it was a Jewish world. Somehow I received a life sentence. I feel imprisoned by my memories, by my past, and destined never to break free from that prison. But I must bear witness for all those who never had a chance. Thank you.

Charlene, you've described to us what you would consider an idyllic and you referred to it as uneventful, but a very rich and good life as a youngster. But that, of course, all changed dramatically when war broke out in 1941. At first, you fell under Soviet rule. Spend just a little time telling us about what it was like under the Soviets before we move on to the Germans occupying where you lived.

As a child, I did not notice many changes. Obviously, when the Soviets came in, because Poland was divided. The eastern part went to the Soviet Union, and the western part became the property of the Nazis of Germany. Well, I did not notice many changes. Obviously, there were many, many changes.

But my father still kept his position at the university. My older sister and I attended school. The only thing I remember that was different was the fact that the official language became Russian instead of Polish.

Now where I come from, that area changes borders so often that most people are bi- or tri-lingual out of necessity, and consequently, speaking or knowing more than one language is a necessity. So going from Polish to Russian was not a very big deal.

Our life went on. And I felt that that was it. Obviously, later, I found out that there were many changes. But as far as I was concerned, that was the only change that I remember when the Soviets took over that part of Poland.

And Charlene, of course, once the Germans turned on the Russians, and occupied the part of Poland where you were living, things changed very dramatically. Tell us what it was like when the Germans occupied your town, and what happened after that.

Well, actually, in 1941, in the summer-- and I don't remember dates, but I guess the Germans decided to pursue their evil goals, and they broke the agreement with the Soviets, and started pursuing-- I mean, pushing back into Russia. Our town, Horochow, was occupied almost immediately. The Germans came in with long columns of foot soldiers, artillery, and tanks.

There wasn't that much-- there wasn't much bloodshed. But once the German-- the Germans came in, the lives of the Jewish people changed completely. Right from the very beginning, the Germans burned all our synagogues, all our Torahs, and all our prayer books. And now I do want to tell you about this wooden synagogue that Mr. Benson showed you on one of the slides.

This synagogue is very meaningful and very important. Why? Because it was a wooden synagogue. In Poland, there were about 40-plus wooden synagogues. That meant that these synagogues were built completely out of wood. Even the nails were wooden. The only thing that wasn't wooden were the glass windows.

Many years before the war started, in the early 1920s, a visionary here in the United States decided to commission and send a good photographer to Poland in order to take pictures, photos of all the wooden synagogues. And then I guess he put it in a book. And that was it.

Several years ago, a friend of mine was traveling to Sweden. And he went into a bookstore and just was just browsing around. And all of a sudden, he saw the book with all the wooden synagogues.

He knew my story, and he knew that my synagogue went up in smoke all these years ago. He took a photo of the synagogue. And when he came back to the United States, he gave me the most precious gift that I've received in a long time-- a photo of that wooden synagogue that doesn't exist anymore. And that's the only reason that picture is here today.

When the Germans burned all these synagogues, and prayer books, and all, the next thing they did is round-- they rounded up 300 Jewish leaders. They took them away, never to be heard from again. My father was among those 300.

Now there is a question-- how did the Germans know who was a leader in our town? It pains me, I'm very sad to say this, but it seems the friends and neighbors with whom we lived in such a great harmony all these years before the war turned to be our enemies overnight. To this day, I'm puzzled, and I have many, many questions. And I know these questions will never be answered. How does a human person, how does a human turn so opposite in one's feeling, that you live together in harmony and peace for all these years, and then one event, and these people turn enemy.

But they did. They, the young Ukrainian people, provided the Germans with the names of the leaders, and they were taken away, never to be heard from again.

Then, after that, the Germans did have decrees every day. They tried to take everything that was precious to us-- gold, silver, nickel, Persian rugs, paintings, bicycles, musical instruments. And there again, my sister, who was so musically dedicated, refused to give up her violin. And as a matter of fact, she took it with her to the ghetto.

We were ordered right after all these decrees with the Germans. And then again, they also formed what they called a Judenrat. A Judenrat was a group of men who dealt directly with the Germans, and they had to satisfy every whim, and they had to carry out all the orders that the Germans gave to the Jews.

But at that time, we were ordered to wear a yellow Star of David on the front and on the back of our clothing. Everyone 14 years of age was reported to slave labor, marched away early in the morning, and brought back to the ghetto late at night. Often, these people who worked, the slave laborers, my mother, my sister, they came home black and blue from beatings they endured during work.

Those who worked received a very small food ration. Children like myself didn't receive any food because we didn't work.

When my mother and my sister were at work, I would sneak out of the ghetto--

Charlene, I'm going to stop you there for just a minute. Let me ask you just a couple of questions before we return to what you were about to tell us in the ghetto. Tell us a little bit about your-- I know this is very hard, but tell us a little bit about your father being taken. And I remember you telling me a story about what a dignified man he was, and he wanted to put on his jacket.

Well, that was in the very beginning when the Germans came in, and they rounded up the 300 Jewish leaders. They came into our house, which was surrounded by Ukrainian young people who were helping the Germans round up the Jews. And when they burst into our house, on the front-- we were still in our house-- on the front entrance, my father tried to get out through the kitchen door. But there were young Ukrainian men whom we knew, whom he knew too. And they stopped them. They wouldn't allow him to get out. He went back.

My father was a very formal man. And he was in shirtsleeves at the time. But he wanted to put on his suit jacket, and they wouldn't allow him to do that.

And we never even said goodbye. My father walked out. He was a very tall man. And he towered over the Germans and the Ukrainians who led him away. His last look, I will never forget. It was a look of pride and of love. We never saw my father again.

My mother turned gray. Her hair turned gray overnight. And I have never seen my mother break down, or not in charge of a situation. But that was the only time, when they took away my father. She turned gray, and she put on his jacket, and she never went without it.

Charlene, tell us about your father's library.

My father collected rare books and first editions. And that was, I think, one of his most-- I call it the magnificent obsession of my father's, collecting books, rare books. And again, before-- that was after they took my father away. We were still in the house.

One day, early in the morning, a van pulled up, a covered van, and several Germans burst in asking my mother where my father's library was. And of course she had to lead him into the library. And they took all the books away.

And that was one time when they addressed my mother as gnaedige Frau, which usually it was "dirty Jew," but in this case, they gave her the honor of-- I don't even know what gnaedige Frau means. But it was a--

A formal--

--form of respect. And they gave her-- they gave my mother a receipt for the books that they just stole.

That they stole. But then again, how did they know about the library? Again, our former neighbors and friends must have informed the Germans about it.

Charlene, you were, before I interrupted you, you were starting to tell that remarkable story, I think, about what you were doing while your mother and sister were forced to do slave labor, about slipping out of the ghetto.

Well, now, first I must tell you how we were herded into the ghetto one morning. Everything was announced on our-- what do you call it? On a loudspeaker. And we had to gather at the market square. And we were told that we had an hour to report, and we had to-- we could take with us only what we could carry with us, and had to leave all else behind.

And so we gathered in the market square. And then we were herded into one of the poorest section of town, and assigned a space to live. Now this section of town was already prepared for us. I mean, there was a high wooden fence all around the ghetto. That was the ghetto. And the wooden fence was finished off with barbed wire.

There were two gates in the ghetto, and these gates were guarded 24/7. One needed a written permit to enter or exit the ghetto. And that's the way we moved to the ghetto. We were actually assigned a space with three other families in one room.

And we had to build bunk beds, because there was not enough space in the room to accommodate the four families. But somehow, we managed, or I think the older people, the mothers, and the sisters, and the aunts-- mostly it was women because most of the men were taken away-- we somehow managed.

But when my mother and my sister went off to work, kids like myself were left with nothing to do. And as the ghetto was being actually organized, there was an awful lot of commotion, and chaos, and nobody paid attention to us kids, the younger kids.

About 20 of us got together, and we dug what we called euphemistically a tunnel. Well, it wasn't really a tunnel. It was a hole that went under the wooden fences, under the gates of the ghetto. And it went outside.

And there we found a little dilapidated kiosk where they used to sell magazines and what have you. The roof was gone, but the walls, the rounded walls, were still intact. And so we made that our exit on the outside.

And we took turns. About 20 of us did this. And nobody paid any attention to us, because the ghetto was just being organized. And so we took turns to go out. This way, when we went through the tunnel, we didn't need a permit to get out of the ghetto. And we could try and buy some food for our families.

I know my mother and my sister were very unhappy with this project, but it was-- we were so hungry all the time, that any kind of possibility of acquiring some extra food could not be refused.

And I remember one incident in particular. It was my time to go outside of the ghetto and to try to bring home some food to the family. I was lucky. I remember I was wearing-- it was summer, and I was wearing a dress with puffed sleeves.

I went out through the tunnel, and didn't wear my Star of David. And I was lucky to be able to buy-- I bought two eggs for one of my mother's gold and ruby rings. And I was very lucky, and I was happy. And I put an egg in each puff and tried to walk back to the tunnel opening in the kiosk.

But before I made my way there, I was caught. The Ukrainian guard searched me, and he found the two eggs. He threw them on the sidewalk and rubbed my face on the eggs until it was bleeding. And he was screaming and yelling, I should go back where I belong and never to come out again.

And he let me go. He was one of the rare, kind-hearted guards. My bloody face healed, and I had my life.

A few days later, it was a friend of mine's turn to go outside. She was able to buy a half a loaf of bread for-- I don't know-- for money or for jewelry. And as she was making her way back, she was caught and murdered right then and there.

The Germans wouldn't even allow us to bury her. She had to be on display on a little hill in the ghetto, what not to do, and what the result is when you do the things that the Germans didn't want you to do.

Charlene, there's so much that we need to hear from you. And I'm a little-- we have to move on. But I do want you to tell us, your sister and your mother were doing slave labor, and your sister was ill. And so tell us about what happened when you offered to take her place. And you're still just a young child.

Well, one day, my sister came home from work very ill with a high fever. And she just was very ill. Mother spent the entire night applying slices of potato, raw potato, to her forehead.

You see, in the ghetto, there used to be a hospital in the beginning. But that was already no more. There were no pharmacies. There were no doctors anymore. And we had to rely on home remedies to try to get one well. And my mother, I went to sleep, but she stayed up all night applying slices of raw potato to her forehead.

Next morning, we got up, and she was still quite ill. I don't know how my mother could stand it, not sleeping all night, and then having to go to work. But she was getting ready.

And then I told my mother, or I had a proposition. I said, look, I know, I'm five years younger than my sister. But my sister would always come home from work and tell us how lucky she felt because that work was a choice assignment. She was always indoor. It was in a warehouse.

And the main thing was is when she reported when they came to work, the person who guarded them, the guard, would only read the names. And as long as the person answered, they were there. This guard left them alone for the rest of the day to do their work.

Well, as it happened, I said I knew how to knit. And would he-- would my mother allow me to take my sister's place for that one day. To make a long story short, my mother gave in and said, OK. It doesn't seem to be dangerous. Go ahead.

And I went. And all the girls took me in. And they showed me where my sister was sitting. The guards started reading the names. He read my sister's name. I said "present." I picked up the needles, and I started knitting.

I don't remember. It was something very simple. I knew how to knit, but obviously I was not as efficient as the older girls were. And everything would have been all right, except it was my exquisite bad timing. That day the Germans decided to have an inspection of the warehouse, of the knitting warehouse. And they burst in, a whole group of them, and positioned themselves all over the warehouse.

One German stood behind me, watched me for a little while, and then started cursing and screaming, I should knit schneller-- faster. And the more he yelled, the slower I was knitting.

He finally became so exasperated, he jumped in front of me, watched me for a minute. And I'll never forget his red face, with foam coming out of his mouth, that was spitting right into my face. And for a minute, he watched. And then he pulled the two needles out of my hands and stuck one of the needles in my right forehand forefinger.

I passed out, and that was it. I was told later that the older girls took care of me, and that I was lucky that this guy did not kill me right then and there.

Needless to say, I never got the food ration for that day, and my finger got infected. There were no antibiotics. And consequently, I lost the tip of my right forefinger.

This is just one example of the sadism and the meanness of the Nazis. I could go on and tell you many, many instances very similar. But this is just one example.

I do want to tell you also that life in the ghetto kept deteriorating. In my mind's eye, I can still see dead bodies piled up on the street walks, and their innocence and purity transcended the filth and stench around them. I speak for each one of them, and I cannot allow the world to forget.

Charlene, you would, from that ghetto, you would be-- you and your mother and sister and all the others that were there with you would be forcibly forced into another ghetto. And then, of course, from there, there's a whole new event that occurs for you. And if you would share that with us.

And, well, the next-- that was 1941. 1942, early in spring, the Germans decided that the Jews had too much space, because the population really dwindled considerably. And so we were moved to another ghetto.

The other ghetto was much smaller, and it was in a more-- in even a more dilapidated place. Three sides were covered with a wooden fence and barbed wire. But the fourth side of that ghetto had a natural barrier, a river that divided our city from a small village across the river. And we were lucky to have been assigned a place, a space to live in a house right on the river.

Rumors started flying that the ghetto would be liquidated that summer. And so my mother, and most of the heads of the families-- at that point it was a matriarchal family set up in the ghetto. Everybody tried to find a space where we could hide when the liquidation would take place.

My mother located two places. She couldn't locate one. And one farmer was willing to hide one person and the other one two people. And so my mother had to make a decision, how to divide our family.

And she decided that my sister, who was five years older, could manage by herself. So she would go to the farmer who was willing to hide one person. And mother and I would go to the other place when the time was right.

One day, in early summer, I said goodbye to my terrific big sister as she was going from work to the farmer who was willing to hide one person. She insisted on taking her violin with her. She would wear-- in those days, we didn't wear trousers. She wore a long full dress. And she taped-- tied her violin to her body. She left the case in the room. And she left.

We didn't hear anything for the next two or three days. And that meant that she arrived at her destination OK, and that everything was going according to plan.

And so when my mother came home from work, she said, put on your best clothes and shoes. She wrapped a small bundle for herself and one for me. We ate our meager meal, and we set out to cross the river, to go to the farmer who promised to hide two of us.

It felt strange, and I was very scared when I held on to my mother's hand and we stepped out into the stillness of the dark night. Soon we were in the river, because this house was right near the river.

Suddenly, shots rang out, and we couldn't move. It was so quiet in between that if we would move, it would give away our place where we were.

We stayed there in the bulrushes until the next morning. We couldn't move. It was very difficult, because my mother was tall, so she could crouch. But I couldn't. The water reached up to my chin. And if I would crouch, I would drown. So I had to stand up.

The next morning, other people from the ghetto tried to use the river also to escape from the ghetto. That was the only way to get out. And the guards kept yelling, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] meaning, come out Jew. We can see you.

And people would come out raising their arms. And they would be murdered right then and there.

My mother stayed, and tried to tell me that another day it will quiet down, and we'll be able to cross and make our way across the river, and make our way to the farmer's place.

I stayed up-- I don't know if it was three or four or five days. And I dozed standing up because that's the only way for me to survive. My mother would keep my back from-- supporting my back, because she could crouch but I couldn't.

And by the fourth or fifth day, I fell asleep. I was so tired. And when I woke up, my mother wasn't there.

That day, there was still fire and smoke coming from the ghetto. We heard screams and babies crying. And I don't think I moved for that entire day.

When night fell, it became all quiet. I guess the Nazis did their job and liquidated the entire ghetto. But I lost my mother. And at that time, I couldn't face that, and I tried to tell myself, she probably left me when she had to, and she couldn't wake me. And so I'd make my way to the farmer's place, and there she would be waiting for me.

She did give 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 and-- from him. And one of his daughters actually attended the same school and classes as I did.

And so that night I left, and I crossed the river. And it took me all night to reach the farmer's place.

When I got to the farmer's place, he motioned for me to go into the barn. He wouldn't even invite me to the house. And the first thing after my question was he answered that my mother was not there. And furthermore, he said, I'll allow you to stay the day, and then you'd better leave or else I'll report you to the authorities.

I tried to plead with him to allow me to stay at least one more day so I could get some sense out of my situation. But he refused to listen to me.

And I looked at him. And there was this strange thing. He was wearing coveralls. And there was my father's gold pocket watch hanging out of one of his pockets.

He turned around, didn't even say goodbye, and walked out. And there I was in the barn, not finding my mother and not knowing what was going to happen to me.

Pretty soon, his wife, the farmer's wife, came in, gave me a piece of bread and an apple, and told me, you'd better leave when it gets dark or he's going to take you to the authorities. And that meant I would be killed.

So when it got dark, I left. I was bewildered, and I really didn't know what was going to happen to me. That night, I walked and walked and finally ended up in a field of wheat. And that's where I spent that first night, trying to make

some sense of what was going on.

I felt so alone. I needed to find my mother. Who was going to take care of me? What was I going to eat? The apple and the piece of bread were long gone. Where was I going to sleep?

Well, I never found my mother, but I could not give up. I had to tell myself that I will find my mother. And I ended up running from forest to forest in search of my mother. I could not give in to tell myself that I would never find her, because had I done that, I would have never survived.

It's an amazing thing how one wants to live, and how one can do awful things in order to survive. It was so bad that I started eating insects, worms, and the like, because it was very hard to obtain food.

There was one-- do I have time?

Mm-hmm.

There was one instance that I do want to share with you, because there were many, many instances that were really horrible. But this one involved others, and so I want to share it with you.

This was in the very beginning of my running into the forests. And there were six other people, Jewish people, who were also coming from different ghettos, and they also escaped the murderers, Nazis, like I did.

We were sitting in a little circle in a forest where we met, at the edge of a forest. This forest did not have much underbrush, so it was not very good for hiding. And we were sitting and comparing notes, and trying to share information, where to get food. And maybe they knew of other survivors of our families.

All of a sudden, a group of children from a neighboring village spotted us. And it was very easy to see that we were Jews, because we were unkempt. We were not well dressed. They knew that we were running from the Germans.

And these kids ran back to their village to report us because there was a small monetary reward for reporting a Jew. And we knew we had to hide. There was no place to hide in that forest, because it had very sparse underbrush. And so we ran into the fields.

It was harvest time, and there were huge haystacks. The haystacks there at that time were entirely different from the haystacks here. Here we have very tight, round little haystacks. There they were long like barns, and narrow. And the hay was not as thick, as densely filled in.

And so we all hid. We all ran into one haystack. Why all seven of us ran into the one haystack I cannot tell, but that's what we did.

When the villagers and their kids came looking for us, it wasn't very hard for them to zero in on that one haystack. They came with pitchforks and started stabbing the haystack back and forth, singing and joking, and being-- just making a game of it.

I heard screams. And it was very hard for me. And I remember all I concentrated on was not to sneeze and not to cough. The dust from the hay was choking me, and yet I didn't want to give him the place where I was hiding.

I was scratched with the--

Pitchfork.

--pitchforks, but I was not really hurt. I waited and waited. And then it got all quiet. And by that time it was dark and it was night.

I made my way out of the haystack. And to my horror, there I saw six mutilated bodies, their clothes removed, their shoes removed. And there was-- I didn't even know the names of these people.

But there was one woman there with a baby. And she, when we met in the circle in the forest, she had her baby strapped to her breast, to her chest, with a heavy shawl. It was a little boy, a beautiful little boy. And he was so hungry, he was sucking her thumb.

I remember I had two carrots in my burlap sack. I took out one carrot and I gave it to the mother. And she promptly stuck it in the baby's mouth.

Now, when I saw the mutilated bodies, the baby was on the mother's chest, and they stuck the carrot in his mouth.

I know the name of the baby was Buzio.

Charlene--

I'm sorry.

--you would spend, I think, the better part of two years hiding in the forest until the war's end. And there's obviously not time for us to cover what was, I think for everybody in this room, an unimaginable ordeal. But just a couple of questions-- and we may have just a couple of moments to ask-- have some questions from the audience.

But winters were fierce. How did you manage-- do you remember how you managed to stay warm? That was one question. The other is, I had asked you at one point if you were afraid of wild animals, and you said not really. But dogs were the animals you feared most. Would you say a little bit about that?

Well, yeah, when I was in the forest, the way I was managing, I would dig little graves, and I would stay there during the day. And then at night I would try and go and find some food.

It's strange. In the forest, the animals treated me like one of their own. No animal ever bit me or was mean to me.

But the dogs in the villages were really the bane of my existence. The minute I would go near a village, they would start barking, and informing the entire world that I was coming, and I was not welcome. Many times they would bark, and I would have to run away. Other times, I was bitten by ferocious dogs, who actually, I love dogs now. But I guess they were trying to protect their farmers, their property, their master's property, and they didn't want me there.

How I survived in the winter is no way anyone can ever believe. And again, the thing is, when you think of hiding in the forest, and trying to overcome hunger, and thirst, and fear of any human being, the most, I think, painful for me was the lack of contact with human beings. It was very, very difficult.

I think I started talking to myself. I missed having human contact. And it was as painful, if not more so, than being hungry, being thirsty, and being cold.

I can't believe what was happening and how I survived. But against all odds, I did survive.

And I was rescued, actually, when I was dying, in one of my little graves, by the Soviet Union soldiers. It happened that the war was turning against the Germans, and the Soviet Union soldiers were pushing the Germans back. At that time, I was dying in one of my little graves. I must have eaten something that didn't agree with me. And consequently, I became ill. I couldn't even lift my head to get away from my own filth.

A group of soldiers was trying to pitch their tents for the night. And as it happened, several of them, I was told later, came upon my camouflaged little grave. They investigated. And to their credit, and my absolute good luck, they found me there. They cleaned me up, and they took me with them.

They took me with them, and put me in their what they called field hospital, which was actually a tent that they would pitch every night, wherever they stayed for the night. I don't remember any of it, because I was too sick.

But at the end-- and finally, they came. This group of soldiers came to the city of Luck-- L-U-C-K. And there they left me in a regular hospital with a note-- and I'm paraphrasing, because I never saw the note. And it said, this is a child of the forests. Treat her gently with great care. And there they actually nursed me back to reasonable health. And that's the way I survived.

The story doesn't even end there, but I know we don't have much time. I would like to give you my last \$0.02 and then open it for questions if we have time.

Why don't we do this. I think we're not going to be able to do questions, Charlene. So let me just say a couple of closing remarks and then turn back to you to close the program, if we could do that.

I'd like to first, of course, thank Charlene for being our "first person" today. Clearly we just couldn't begin to cover all that Charlene could share with us. And I know all of you wish that we had the afternoon to spend. I know I do. There's so much more to cover. But hopefully we've just got a glimpse of what Charlene experienced.

Before I turn back to Charlene, I'd like to remind you that we will have a First Person program each Tuesday and Wednesday in June and July, and again every Wednesday until the end of August. Next week, our First Person on Tuesday, June 3 will be Mrs. Helen Luksenburg. Mrs. Luksenburg, who was born in Poland, survived the Gleiwitz and Ravensbrück concentration camps.

It's our tradition at First Person that our "first person" gets the last word. So I'm going to turn back to Charlene now. But I'd also like to again mention that after this program, Charlene will be up outside at the top of the stairs where she will be signing copies of Echoes of Memory, the museum's book of writings by survivors. And so with that, Charlene, please end us.

OK my plea to you, dear friends, we must continue to fight what I call the four evil I's-- the evils of Indifference, Ignorance, Injustice, and Intolerance. These evils are so pertinent, even more pertinent today than they were 65 years ago. In the '90s we had Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda. Now we have Darfur, Sudan. Unfortunately, genocide is still with us and antisemitism is on the rise.

Now I am appealing, especially to our young people. You, young people, are our dearest possession and 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.

And then again, a few words about this museum and what it means to me. I am in awe of this institution. It is a memorial to the millions who perished, a moral voice, an institution of higher learning. It stands as a powerful witness of genocide, born of racial hatred.

When the last survivor is no longer here, this institution will be a constant reminder and warning to those who tamper with human rights. It is a place of remembrance, reflection, and renewal.

I am especially moved when I go up to the fourth floor, where, on the glass wall of the walkway, my town, Horochow, is engraved among many other lost Jewish communities. It is one tangible connection to my past.

Thank you for being such a wonderful audience, and thank you for giving me your time.

[APPLAUSE]