

Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. And I'm the host of the museum's public program, First Person. Thank you for joining us.

This is our 10th year of First Person. Our First Person today is Mrs. Katie Altenberg, whom you shall meet shortly. This 2009 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Doris Smith Foundation to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring First Person.

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 presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. With few exceptions, we will have a First Person program each Wednesday through August 26. We will also have first person programs on Tuesdays beginning on April 14. And those will last through July. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org-- that's www.ushmm.org-- provides a list of our upcoming first person guests.

This year we are offering a new feature associated with First Person. Excerpts from our conversations with survivors will be available as podcasts on the museum's website. Several are already posted on the website. And Katie's will be available within the next several weeks. The First Person podcast joined two other museum podcast series-- Voices on Antisemitism and Voices on Genocide Prevention. The podcasts are also available through iTunes.

Katie Altenberg will share 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 a few questions of Katie. Before you're introduced to her, I have several requests of you and a couple of announcements.

First, if possible, please stay seated throughout the one hour program. That way we will minimize any disruptions for Katie as she speaks. Second, if we do have time for question and answers, and I hope we will, and you have a question, please make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so that everybody in the room, including Katie, can hear the question, and then she'll respond to it.

If you have a cell phone or a pager that has not yet been turned off, we ask that you do that now. For those of you who have passes to the permanent exhibition today, please know they are good for the entire afternoon. So you can comfortably stay with us and then go to the permanent exhibit.

[INTERPOSING AUDIO]

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. Roma and Sinti, or Gypsies, people with mental and physical disabilities, 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 Germany.

More than 60 years after the Holocaust, hatred, antisemitism, and genocide still threaten our world. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades and remind us of the constant need to be vigilant citizens and to stop injustice, prejudice, and hatred wherever and whenever they occur. 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 this photo of Katie Altenberg and her brother, Adi, in 1936. Katie was born 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 with a horse. Greta is pictured here-- Katie's mother is pictured here with five of her six sisters, and the circle is on Greta.

Katie's father was born in Hungary. He was one of four children. Here, we see Katie's father as a small boy 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 indicates the approximate location of Burgenland. Katie's father, Ludwig, an agronomist, leased land and built a general farm. Here, we see Katie on her father's farm in 1937.

Shortly after German troops invaded Austria in 1938 in what is known as the Anschluss, Katie's father was arrested. But her mother was able to get him released. However, he had to leave the country immediately. A short time later, the family joined her father on her uncle's estate in Hungary.

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. During this time, Ludwig, her father, escaped Kistarcsa and smuggled Katie and Adi out of the children's camp. 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. Katie is seen on the left with her brother, Adi, and on the right with her parents and two cousins in the fall of 1945.

Katie emigrated to the United States with her family in November 1948. On the left is a photo of Katie with her daughter, Karen, her 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, Katie became 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 their 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 Prince Klaus Conservatory in the Netherlands, where he teaches American jazz. Karen, her daughter, who earned an MBA at New York University, and after a period in the corporate world earned a master's degree in social work. She and her husband live in Chicago. They have three children. Katie's three grandchildren are ages 12, 9, and 6.

Katie retired from her floral design business four years ago. She speaks to groups that visit the museum, including groups of children. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Katie Altenberg.

[APPLAUSE]

Katie, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person today. We'll get started right away because we have so much to cover for you to tell us about. Katie, your parents married in 1934. You were born in 1936. War would not erupt in Europe until 1939. Let's begin with telling us a little bit about your parents, your community and yourself in those years before the war began.

My mother comes from a family in Vienna. My grandfather was an advisor to the emperor before World War I and a commercial advisor. And later, he became the head of distribution of dairy products, like eggs, milk, butter, cheese, and so on, for the whole of Vienna.

She was the youngest of eight children and wasn't interested in getting married too well-- too much because she enjoyed her life. Anyway, my father pursued her. He graduated in Hungary and started a farm in Burgenland.

And he always thought in big terms. He had the first tractor, which came from Detroit with a mechanic. [LAUGHTER] And that was very important. And he had many prizes in-- his specialty was breeding oxen, the Longhorns. And I have several prizes that have remained, somehow survived the war.

Your father leased the land that he had his estate on. Why was that?

Jews could not own land in Austria. So he was able to lease, I don't know, somewhere between 1,000 and 2000 acres from the Holy Cross Order, who owns half of Vienna. And they needed somebody to manage the land. So he built

houses. He had I think maybe 40 families who lived there. And he had to build a road to the main drag and had a school on the property and so on.

You mentioned that you had the first Ford tractor in Austria and had a mechanic. The purpose of the mechanic was not only to fix it but, kind of to teach everybody--

Right.

--how to drive it, and how to fix it after that. Your father trained Jews in the early 1930 in agriculture. Tell us about that.

Young Jews needed to go or wanted to go-- they were Zionists-- and wanted to go to Israel. But they had no experience in treating the land, managing the land. So they would come. They were called halutzim, young farmers to be. And they would spend several months on the farm learning something about farming. And that went on for a few years.

And there was a thought that they would go on to Palestine at some point.

Yes, they went on to Palestine to manage the land. They started the kibbutzim and the moshavs-- moshav meaning farms, community farm.

Even though your father's livelihood was agriculture and you lived on a farm, an estate, but a farm, their social life was still in Vienna. Say a little about that.

My mother had a wonderful life in Vienna. And she didn't quite want to live in the countryside. So her father had, at this point retired, and had a very large apartment in a very wonderful location right across from the Viennese Stadtpark, which is a city park, which is a little bit like the big park in New York. And so she kept a suite of rooms within his apartment and would go-- she had a car, and they would drive to Vienna often. Yes.

What was life like for you, to the extent can remember, as living on a farm?

I don't remember any of it. I have to look at these photographs to imagine it because we had to escape Vienna before I was two. So my memory of Vienna is--

Just what you've been told.

Right. Comes from my parents.

Katie, the Anschluss took place in early 1938. Tell us what the Anschluss was and what its consequences were for you and your family.

Well, the Anschluss was Austria, with open arms, welcoming the Germans. It was a political annexation of Austria basically, which made life difficult. And my father's manager thought that if he'd get rid of my father, he would get the place. So he went right away to the Gestapo.

And my father was arrested, I think, like March, April of '38, so immediately after. And my mother was able to bribe him out. However, they told him he had to leave the country immediately. So in a hay wagon--

And the bribe, it was not insignificant, was it?

No. I mean, everything, they took our car. They took our bank accounts and I think some jewelry. This was-- I even know the name because my mother was cursing this man forever. His name was Koch. And he came from the city of Eisenstadt, which is the capital of Burgenland. Austria several states. And he came, and he confiscated her car, as I said, all her possessions basically.

So the bribe for her to get your father out of prison was to have them take everything and then on top of that say, and he

must leave the country immediately.

Yeah. And better get lost.

So what did he do?

So one of his employees in a hay wagon covered with hay drove him over the border to Hungary. Hungary, at this point was still on its own. And he had his stepbrother, or half-brother, I should say, was living in Hungary at the time. And he also had a big estate. And we went there.

So you went to another farm.

Right.

And you said to me-- one time you said that was both the best of times and the worst of times.

Well, because I was like less than 2 and 1/2 at this point, less than-- well, I got there about 2. And then the next two, three years, we lived on this farm. And I went to a nursery school. And everything was like a new child, you know.

In fact, you--

--exciting for me.

One time, you put it to me as that was a normal time--

Yeah, relatively normal.

For you.

I was not aware of what my parents were going through. My aunt was living there. And we had this wonderful kitchen. And I used to play in the kitchen with-- I remember one time I opened a drawer and all these dish towels were there and whatnot. And I found a nest of little mice, little pink mice. And I said, oh, isn't this adorable.

And my aunt threw a fit. She was such a neat person. And she chewed out all the girls in the kitchen and how come they haven't cleaned out and all that. So little experiences like this. I have several of them.

And we had this fabulous orchard just outside the door. And the back of the Catholic Church was a wall inside this garden. And there was a little window behind the altar. And we used to climb up there and peek in. You know, usual kid stuff.

Your father was able to come back to join you. And then things really began to change for the family in a much bigger way in 1942.

Yes. We first moved to a little house at the edge of the village to be inconspicuous. But that didn't last very long. And one night, the--

Say a little bit more about that-- to be inconspicuous.

Yeah, well, because antisemitism was raging. And also, there was a lot of-- actually, we weren't bombed. But bombers were flying overhead all the time, probably going further east, I don't know. And the village was very antisemitic. And I can't specifically tell you. But I know my parents were very nervous.

And we were in this little house on this little street. And food was getting scarce. I know my parents slaughtered an animal and had it cut up and put into storage. And we didn't have any refrigeration. It was like an 1850s village. There

was nothing, dirt roads. The houses were thatched roofed.

And I remember, from a child's point of view, I always heard the story of Aladdin and the 40 thieves that came in those buckets, or whatever. And when we slaughtered this animal, everything was cooked on the spot and put into rendered fat, into these enamel 5-gallon jugs kind of thing, because the fat would preserve everything. So that was one memory I have.

And then at some point, all of you would be arrested.

Right. One night at the Nyilas, which is the equivalent of the Gestapo in Hungary, who were very gung ho, two bayoneted soldiers came and said, pack up, half an hour the train is leaving for Budapest. So we all left for Budapest. And we were put into the national prison, called the [PLACE NAME]. And we were there, I don't know, not a very long time.

And we were sent to Kistarcsa from there, which was a concentration camp just outside of Budapest. It started out as a space for political prisoners and then eventually for Jews in general. And we were there for a while.

You mentioned the Hungarian version of the--

Nyilas.

The Nyilas. Also, is that known as the Arrow Cross?

Yeah, yeah.

We may have heard of it as the Arrow Cross, but the fascist--

Sorry.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Gestapo--

I still think Nyilas.

What do you what do you recall of life in Kistarcsa, in the prison?

I remember the room. It was a huge, like a huge dormitory, or open space. I don't know what it was before. But there were wire cots lined up. And we had three wire cots and no mattresses, and whatever we had with us. And my father was in another section. All the men were in another section. And that's about all I remember of the place, except that it was very unfriendly, to say the least.

At some point you and your brother, Adi, would be allowed to leave. Where did you go? And how--

We went to Budapest. They announced that if you were under a certain age, you could go to Budapest if you had relatives there. And my father's sister was living in Budapest. And so my parents decided we should go there. But there was a delay. We were in a children's camp first. And--

And your parents stayed behind in--

Yeah, my parents stayed in Kistarcsa. My mother eventually volunteered for a labor camp because she felt that if she could work on a-- there was some kind of a farming labor camp nearby that was supplying food. And she figured that

way she could feed herself and somehow make it.

And my father was always escaping and getting caught again. And at one point, the man who was making up the list it-- this camp became a deportation site. The trains from here went to Auschwitz and so on.

And he was a very good chess player, my father. And he used to play chess with this manager who made the list of who was getting deported. And every time he won a game, his name would go at the end of the line. And that was one way he survived. And eventually, he managed to escape again.

Before we come back to that, you and Adi went to your aunt's house in Budapest. Tell us what that was like for you. And tell us about your aunt.

My aunt had a-- I had been in that apartment before. And I don't remember, it must have been during war time already. But Hungary was not involved in the war till a little bit later than the rest of the countries around there. And at that time, it was still a very pleasant place for me.

My aunt and my uncle were there. And we would go for walks. The apartment overlooked the Danube. And we used to walk along the Danube. And it was very nice. And my uncle was wonderful. We had presents every morning and so on. It was very nice.

But at this point, the house was-- I found out much later here in Washington that it was a designated protected house from Wallenberg, Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved a lot of Jews in Hungary. It was a small park where the buildings all around it, apartment buildings.

And all these buildings were protected either by him or by other embassies. And so people were gathering into these houses. And I remember this relatively small apartment that we were living in suddenly had 60, 70 people in it. And like there was nowhere to go.

And your uncle, who was such a wonderful man, he was not there now.

He was already gone. And later on, we found out he had been killed. And there was a daughter, my cousin Vera, who was about 18 at the time. And she had also left. She's no longer with us. But for years and years, she had never told me what happened to her. She was a beautiful young woman. And I don't know. It wasn't good.

And as the apartment and the building and your apartment began to fill up with more and more people, tell us what you did to get a little bit of just privacy.

Well, with all these people, there were other kids around. And we used to sit in the stairwell and play games and whatnot. And also, my bed was the window seat in the apartment, which was, excuse me, a bay window. And we would look outside. And it was-- well, even before that, I guess before it got so crowded, my aunt would take us for walks and we would go to the local Konditorei, the pastry shop, and have chestnut slices and walk along the Danube. And that was very nice.

But later on, things got bad. And we couldn't go out. So we were looking out the window. And in this park, they would be gathering people and then take them away. And they were either taken to the ghetto or just to the railroad station and away.

And you could see this out the window?

Right. And on top of it all, there was a war going on. So the Germans were in the Buda-- I mean in the Pest, where we were. And Buda across the river was slowly being run by the Russians. So the war shooting back and forth, and the bombing was going on. And every time a bomb fell in the river, we were cheering it didn't fall on us. And times were tough.

And one day I remember, I don't know if we were still walking out. I don't remember when-- my sequence is not very good. But the bridge, right, we could see a bridge from where we lived. I think it was the Elizabeth Bridge, or whatever. And the Germans blew up that bridge in the mid-morning traffic so that as they were leaving the city and the Russians were coming in.

And that was a horror. I mean just trolley cars and cars and buses and people, and it was terrible. Yeah, that was really shocking.

Did you know anything about where either your mother or father were at that time?

As I say, my father was with us and not with us, periodically coming and going. My mother, we didn't know where she was. We didn't-- I did not know anything about my mother until after the war.

So we were in-- my aunt was not the greatest mother. And I remember she couldn't cook. And she couldn't nothing. So I remember-- I don't know who taught me or how, I could make two things. I could make baked beans, and I could make French fried potato.

And I remember now when I think about it and with my grandkids, all this hot oil. And I climb up on a chair. And I remember you slice the potatoes. And then we dried them in a towel. And anyway, I like making French fries.

[LAUGHTER]

Eventually, Katie, you would leave her apartment and go to another place, possibly a hospital.

I went to a hospital because I had all the childhood diseases together-- chicken pox, mumps--

Mumps. Measles?

Whatever, all those children's diseases. Plus, I had these terrible boils, I mean all over me. And I was sent to the hospital. And it was a bombed out Jewish hospital.

And my father, at this point, had arranged for us to go on a Kindertransport, which is a children's transport, that somebody paid for in addition to him to get a ship to go to Israel. And I was supposed to go. But I was sick.

And my brother was a year younger than I was. So we were like, I don't know, 4 or 5, or 5 and 6, something in that neighborhood. And my aunt couldn't see sending my brother by himself. So she contaminated him, and he ended up in the hospital with me. So we were there with the bedbugs. And every morning, the sheets were red because the bedbugs were coming out of the old woodwork.

Anyway, so we were there for a while. And I guess then we were taken to the ghetto from there. And while we were-- I guess we were better by now. And we were like about 600 children marching to the ghetto with bayoneted soldiers.

And I saw my father on the street corner. And he was looking for us. And it's funny how you just don't react. You just go on. You pretend you didn't see anything. Anyway, we ended up in the ghetto in a building, in an empty building--

Just to make sure we have it right.

Yes.

You were 600 children marched, I think you said--

Yes.

5 or 6 abreast.

We were all under about 10 or 12, something like that, carrying our little whatever down the street.

And there's your father on--

And my father is there. And we don't react. And we ended up in this empty apartment building.

The kids? Just the kids?

The kids. And we're sitting in all the rooms along the walls, leaning against the wall. And he came with a flashlight looking for us and found us and took us out.

And how did he get you out of there?

Well, he was under false papers. And we got to the gate of the ghetto. There was a 10-foot fence boxing the ghetto in. And there were guards on every gate.

And so he says that he's the friend of the father of these children, and he's taking him out. And, well, he bribed the guy a lot. My father always carried a lot of money on him. And he bribed his way out of there and took us to his sister's house again.

Well, eventually, that protection didn't help. And we were also lined up in the park below the apartment and taken out, marched to the ghetto. And my father was very industrious and very resourcing-- and resourceful is the correct word.

And he found himself a pushcart, like a vendor's pushcart. And it was loaded with suitcases by the time we got to it. And we were down there. And we were pushing to the ghetto. We didn't actually live very far from the ghetto. I went to Budapest in 1990. And I realized that it couldn't have been more than a mile, a mile and 1/4. So we were walking.

And of course, the old people are carrying their stuff. And if they stumble or can't make it, they were killed on the spot. The soldiers would take whatever they could, their rings, their teeth, their whatever out.

And eventually, we got into the ghetto. And basically, we were again in an empty apartment building because they moved all those people out and they gave them Jewish apartments outside. And we moved in there. And they took everything with them. So the buildings were empty.

And I remember we ended up on the top floor, either the fifth floor or the sixth floor, of this apartment building in a corner of a room. We got a corner of one room. And my aunt, my brother, my father, and he is carrying all these suitcases upstairs.

And so I'm wondering what treasures lie in these suitcases. Well, he opened it up, and it turned out to be all dried legumes. So we had peas, beans, soy beans, and whatever. And my aunt was carrying her coffee grinder.

So they ground the beans and the whatever, like the soya beans, and made noodles out of that. And we had beans. And I guess we had a hot plate and a pot or whatever. And we were able to survive on that because there was no food.

The children were asked to go downstairs in this building. It was like a block of buildings with a courtyard in the middle. And there was a soup kitchen down there and made out of nothing. And the kids were supposed to get like a half a slice of bread a week and a bowl of soup. And so a lot of people were very hungry and very run down and exhausted.

And all during this time, there is a war going on. So the bombs are falling and so forth. The air raid signal goes on 3, 4 times a day. And we're going running down to the basement and up again and then down again, and several times a day. And finally, we say that's it, enough. And we stayed upstairs. We said, whatever happens happens.

And that day, or the next day, whatever, a bomb fell into the air shaft, killed everyone in the basement. And we're stuck upstairs with a hole in the stairwell. And we cannot get out. So finally, they came with some boards or something and got us out of there.

But, you know, life was like serendipity. You never knew what was right, what was wrong. You just couldn't predict. And that unpredictability is the most awful thing.

It's like now a little bit like people are worried about their jobs. They don't know. Am I going to have a job tomorrow or not? I can't buy a car. I can't-- and we're in this mess now. So--

Katie, your father-- I think everybody here is probably thinking the same thing. And that is your father sounds like he was a remarkably resourceful, courageous--

Yes.

--gutsy fellow. Do you know how he was able to get all those legumes, all those beans?

Well, being a farmer, he had connections. And I really don't know. He never spoke about any of it. He also went through some major suffering because he was beaten up really badly. And at one time, he was sideswiped by a carriage with horses and all his teeth were injured. But he never spoke about it. And the little that I know, I know of him talking to his friends and I'm overhearing and listening when he doesn't know I'm listening.

And you told me at another time that whereas of course you're now wearing the yellow Jewish star--

Yeah.

--that your father would travel without it--

Right, he never wore it--

--and take huge risks for it.

Yes. And he always had false papers and changed his papers. I don't know, you know, I was little. So I was not too aware of these things. But I'm amazed. I was just thinking about it the other day that how did he do all this?

And here you are now in this bombed out building, and the war's going on. Now it's March 1945. It's been an extraordinarily brutal winter.

Right.

And the Russians liberated Budapest.

And the Russians came into the city finally, to the other side. And we were liberated. And people went out searching for food and whatnot. And my father came back with big jars of candied oranges and grapefruit and whatever, you know those candied fruits. And that was a big treat.

So he'd gone out and found them somewhere out there.

Right. He didn't care about getting precious things or anything. He just wanted to get us. And then we went back to the apartment. And now it was like a gathering place for the relatives to come. But not too many showed up.

And then, where is my mother? So my father went searching for my mother. And he thought she was in a hospital somewhere on the other side of the river.

And there was one bridge that was-- several, I guess, bridges, I don't know. One of the bridges was still standing. And he went over to Buda looking for my mom. And he passed her on the bridge, didn't recognize her. She was being kind of carried by two girlfriends. She was so weak and lost so much weight. And he walked right by her.

But then he overheard her speaking with the others. And he recognized her voice. And that's how they got together.

And she came home. And she was in bed for several months. I don't think we left there till June or July. And we went back to the estate in Hungary of my uncle.

Before you go to that, tell us, how did your mother survive?

Well, as I mentioned, she was in a labor camp. And then she became very ill. And somehow she managed to get to a hospital. My mother had a lot of, as we call, chutzpah. [LAUGHTER] She was like a forerunner of women's lib.

She was in this labor camp. And some young soldier was giving them a hard time. They were working in the fields. And he was expressing his macho. And he, I don't know, beat up some young girl or something.

And my mother stood up and chewed him out royally, which could have cost her her life. And she said, what kind of person are you? And you say you're a Christian and you behave this way. And I don't know, she went into a tirade. And so they had a lot of respect for her. And he did not attack her.

And somehow through these people she was able to get into a hospital. Well, it turned out the hospital was run and maybe owned, I think also, by a man who was a relative of our neighbor outside of Vienna and on the estate. And he protected her. And he took care of her while the Germans were there, because the Germans took everybody out of the hospital, dumped them in the river, and put their own soldiers in. And then the Russians came and dumped the Germans in the river and put their soldiers in.

But she was extremely contagious. She had typhoid, cholera, et cetera, et cetera. And I think there were nuns in this building also. And between the nuns and the doctor, she was somehow isolated. They said they can't go near there.

And so she survived. How I don't know. And she always used to say, I used to watch the bullets over my head. And there were lots of bullet holes in the rooms. The war was like back and forth. And so when she came back, she was very sick and took a long time, 3 months or so, to be in bed and recover.

And as you were starting to tell us earlier, when she recovered, you went to your uncle's estate.

Right. We went back to Hungary. And that was an exciting time.

You have a terrific story to tell us about your mother there too.

Yeah, right. We were back in the estate. And my aunt and uncle did not survive. And their kids didn't come back yet. The son-- one son was retarded, and he was somewhere. He survived. And the other son came back, but much later.

In other words, people who were between let's say 18 and 30, most of those people survived because they escaped. They joined armies like my two cousins from Moravia joined the Czech army-- the Czech division in the British army. And so those people survived.

But at this point, we're alone in on this estate. And first, the Russians come and bivouac in our front yard. And they're like, I don't know from where, I mean they come with-- they're huge people. They come from some mountain region. And they're very primitive. All they're interested in is clocks, watches, and alcohol. So whatever perfume, whatever has any alcohol in it, they drink that.

[LAUGHTER]

And they are fascinated by clocks. Must be they don't have clocks wherever they come from. Anyway, they're on the estate. And my father left for Vienna to talk to the Holy Cross Order and to see what's left of the estate and what our possessions, if anything, is left.

And meanwhile, my mother and the two kids-- so this is now we're like 3, 5, about 8 years old, 7 years old, 8 years old. And we're there. And one of these soldiers comes into the office and asks my mother for something. And she opens a drawer and gives it to him. And her wristwatch is there. How that survived, don't ask me. Or maybe it's a new one. I don't know.

And he grabs it. And you don't mess with my mother. [LAUGHTER] And she went to the commander and said, look, I didn't survive all this to be robbed now by this nobody. And she made such to do that she got her watch back. And this officer, who turned out to be Jewish, set up a guard around the house and protected us. That was the first big to do.

And we're starting to get short on time.

Yes.

And there's still so much to talk about. Tell us how your father managed to then get back into business and then what brought you to the United States.

Yeah, well, this estate, the people hated the idea that we came back because during these few years that we were gone, they ran the estate and they collected the money and whatnot. I don't know who these people are, but the people in the village. And when we came back, they were not happy that we came back.

And by August, when the harvest was coming in and all that, somebody torched the place. And because the village was made out of thatched roofs, the whole village burned down. Our house didn't burn and the church didn't burn down. And the school didn't burn down. But the rest of it all burned down.

But then my cousin, the soldier from the British army, came on a motorcycle looking for us and said, why are you staying here? Come to my house. They don't want you here.

So we went with him to Moravia, a small town in Moravia, where his parents didn't come back. They died in Auschwitz. And so he had this big house with a hardware business on the ground floor. And the manager of the hardware business worked the business during the war.

And so we lived there. And these photographs that you saw after the war, we were in his house. So that was in the yard in the back of the house.

But my father was very unsettled and nervous and didn't like the idea of not having work. And he didn't like working in the hardware store. And so Mr. Green came from Slovakia. You know, these boundaries were changing all the time now that Hungary became Slovakia. And he said, my relatives had a big estate in Slovakia, and I have no idea what to do with it. Could you run it for me?

So we went to Slovakia to a hideous place called [NON-ENGLISH], which I went to look at it in 1990. And I couldn't recognize any of it. And all I saw were old women with black, all in black, sitting on the whatever.

And so we were there. And my father started working. And we started somewhat of a normal life. And I started school. Actually, I started school in Moravia. I went to school there for one year in Czech. And then we forgot Hungarian because the Czechs hated the Hungarians. And we had to learn Czech.

Then we went to Slovakia. And we had to learn Slovak. And then the Russians came in 1947 or so. And we had to learn Russian. And so we were like switching languages all the time. And life was getting better.

But somehow, you decided and made it to the United States.

Oh, and then-- but right from after the war, my father had applied to the US before the war. But the State Department, as you know, did not allow anybody to come in unless you had a special exemption from the president or something. So all through from 1937 till 1939, I guess, until we couldn't leave anymore, they played-- my aunt was in New York, and she kept coming to Washington. And they kept just obfuscating the whole thing saying come back tomorrow, come back next week. And anyway, we couldn't get out.

And so he reapplied again. And we finally made it to the US after three years of waiting on a special visa for agriculturists and rabbis. And we ended up-- by now three years later, we already had money again. And so we gave money to HIAS. HIAS was an organization that still exists today, the Hebrew Immigrant Society, I think.

And we gave them all our money because we couldn't bring it out. And they bought us a ticket to go to the US. Even that was a difficult birth. We paid for tickets, Prague, Paris, London, New York. We flew, DC-6s. And ended up on a Sabena, going Prague, Brussels, Dublin, Saint John, Newfoundland, and New York.

But in the middle of the Atlantic, the pilot gets on the plane and says, we're having terrible icing. We're in the middle of an ice storm. And we're flying around 12,000 feet. So he said, should we go forward or should we go back? And the rabbis all get up in the middle of the aisle of the plane and start praying and say, forward! Forward! And we made it to New York eventually.

[LAUGHTER]

And New York was-- my aunt picked us up in a cab. And driving into New York, I mean, was phenomenal-- to see all this skyline and these high rises. And it was just incredible.

There was quite an ordeal for your father to get back to what he wanted to do, agriculture. And you would end up living in New York, in rural New York. And it wasn't all roses for you.

No, it really wasn't. After about-- we were one month in New York City. And then we went to a place called Grahamsville, which is the one non-Jewish place in the Catskills, although we were on a Jewish farm. And it was on shares, 50-50. And it was a woman with a disabled son. And she couldn't make a living.

But that was a good time for chickens and eggs. In 1949, a dozen of eggs was \$1.00.

Oh, wow.

And that was a lot of money. And so we did really well. And she couldn't stand it that we were getting as much as she was getting.

So my father couldn't deal with working for other people. So he ended up driving all over the country in an old, decrepit Buick looking for a place to buy. And we ended up in a town called New Berlin, New York. And on a relatively large farm, we had a capacity of about 10,000 chickens, which was large at the time.

And it was from a rich man who bought a farm for his son, but it turned out he had asthma and he couldn't do it. So we bought this farm on a 44-year mortgage, no down payment. And so they paid it off ahead of time.

And of course, now, you are in a new country. It's a new language. Tell us what schooling was like for you before we close. And then I do want you to tell us about your experience as a waitress, if you would. OK.

Up in Lake Placid?

Yes.

Well, I went to a school, a central school in New Berlin, New York, which the school was 750 students from

kindergarten to graduation. And I came in seventh grade with three months worth of English, which was OK. I could get by. I wasn't perfect.

But school was-- there was a lot of antisemitism. As the town implies, New Berlin, a lot of German descent. Although the worst person in my life was my math teacher, who was Scottish, I think. And she was an older lady and very glamorous. But she gave us a hard time.

However, my brother and I were the top students in the class. And she only had like 4 to 6 students. So there was not much she could do about it. But she made our life miserable. But I did really well in school, and I became the valedictorian, which was a big no-no and displaced all the favorite people, not even knowing it. I didn't know I was valedictorian till they announced it.

And I wasn't that good a student. Like in English and in Spanish, I'm not a good language person. I was good in math and science.

Go figure.

Well, I'm not a natural language. My mother was a natural language person. And so life was hard.

And during the summers, as soon as I was-- I don't know, what was it, 16 or something you could work? I worked one year I worked at the Norwich Pharmaceutical, which made Pepto-Bismol and Bayer aspirin. And then one year I went up to Lake Placid and got a job as a waitress, server, everything, salad maker, in a small hotel that my mother had some connection to.

But I was so shocked because everything was restricted, restricted, restricted. I said, what does restricted mean? No Jews allowed. So Lake Placid was very restricted when I came. So I never got away from the antisemitism. They were not killing me. But they weren't, you know, the warmest.

And later on I went-- maybe 10 years ago or so, I went back to a high school reunion. And two girls came up to me and said, we were so mean to you. I'm so sorry. And you kind of wash over it and ignore it. But life wasn't easy.

Katie, of course, from there you would go on and become an expert in the medical field, work on research in bone marrow transplant, have a family, and wonderful grandchildren, and here you are today. And I know we could only just gloss over an extraordinary series of events over a number of years. And so I thank you very much for doing this with us.

We don't have time for questions. We're out of time. But Katie will stay behind and step down over here by the podium. So if anybody wants to come and ask her a question, talk with her, just meet her, please, please do so.

And I'm going to turn back to Katie in just a moment. But I want to thank, first, all of you for being here and to remind you that we have a First Person program almost every Wednesday until the end of August. We don't have one next week because of Passover. So there won't be a program next week. And on April 14, we begin doing the program on Tuesdays as well.

So our next program will be Tuesday, April 14, when our first person will be Mr. Herman Taube. Mr Taube, who is from Poland, spent the war years on an extraordinary journey that took him from Poland to Siberia to Uzbekistan then into combat and then helping other Holocaust survivors and other refugees. Mr Taube is also a noted author and poet. So if you can come back, please do on the 14th of April, or any Tuesday through July or any Wednesday through August.

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

Well, first of all, thank you for being here and listening to my story. And I hope it inspires you a little bit to do your

utmost to help that this sort of thing doesn't continue and happen again. Antisemitism is rampant around the world again. And it's very scary to hear about it. So I hope you will all educate each other and your closest and nearest and farthest and try to prevent this. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

And again, Katie will come over here by the podium for those who would like to meet her.