https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection

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

We are in our 10th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mr. Haim Solomon. We shall meet Mr. Solomon shortly.

This 2009 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. And I'd like to let you know that Mr. Louis Smith is in the audience with us today.

[APPLAUSE]

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their first-hand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each First Person guest serves as a volunteer with this museum. We will conclude our First Person program for 2009 next Wednesday, August 26.

Please check the museum's website for information about First Person in 2010. The museum's website is www.ushmm.org. That's www.ushmm.org.

This year we've offered a new service associated with First Person. Excerpts from our conversations with survivors are available as podcasts on the museum's website. A number for this year are already posted. And Haim's will be posted within the next several weeks. The First Person podcast joined two other museum podcast series, Voices on Anti-Semitism and Voices on Genocide Prevention. The podcasts are also available through iTunes.

Our First Person today, Mr. Haim Solomon, will share his first person account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. Depending on time, we hope that we'll have an opportunity for you to ask a few questions of Haim. Before you are introduced to him, I have several announcements and a couple of requests of you.

First, we ask that if it is all possible, please stay seated with us throughout our one hour program. That way we minimize any disruptions for Haim as he speaks. Second, if we do have time for a question and answer period and you have a question, we ask that you make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so everyone in the room, including Haim, hears your question. And then he'll respond to it.

If you have a cell phone or a pager, I ask that you turn that off at this time if you wouldn't mind. I would also like to let those of you who may have passes to the permanent exhibition today know that they are good until the end of the afternoon so that way you can feel comfortable with us throughout our one hour program.

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. 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 tyranny.

More than 60 years after the Holocaust, hatred, anti-Semitism, 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 Haim Solomon is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with this introduction.

I'm running to a slight technical problem. I can't see the screen in front of me. So if you don't mind, I'll probably have to peer over my shoulder just to make sure that you're seeing what I think you're seeing.

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection
Haim Solomon was born November 5, 1924 in Bivolari, Romania. He was the youngest of five children. This photo is of Haim's family in pre-war Romania. Haim is the little boy seated on his mother's lap. From left to right, we see Haim's four siblings, Henry, Hanna, Esther, who is on the top row between her parents, and Reuven.

And here we see Haim's, parents Bercu Solomon and Sofie Halter Solomon. This photo was taken in 1941 or 1942.

On this map of Europe, the arrow points to Romania. After Germany and the Soviets signed their nonaggression pact on August 23, 1939 and divided up Eastern Europe, the Soviets occupied Bessarabia, one kilometer from Bivolari. The Romanian authorities, suspicious of Jewish loyalties because of the close proximity to the Soviets, ordered all Jews to leave Bivolari.

The first arrow on this map of Romania points to the town of Iasi, where Haim and his family moved. Later, to escape fighting and chaos that eventually erupted in the streets, Haim and his family moved to Bucharest in June of 1944. They remained there until the end of the war. The second arrow on this map points to Bucharest.

In the summer of 1947, as Haim, along with thousands of other Jews made his way to Palestine by ship, the British captured his ship and took all passengers to Cyprus for internment. In this photograph taken in Cyprus, Haim stands behind a barbed wire fence. Finally, in December 1948, Haim escaped the British internment camp on Cyprus and succeeded in reaching Israel.

Haim came to the United States in 1952. Today, Haim and his wife Malvy live here in the Washington, DC area. He retired January 1, 2003 following a 38-year career with the United States Food and Drug Administration where he was a microbiologist and is one of the world's experts on the microorganism that causes botulism. He has over 30 scientific publications under his name. In this day of bioterrorism concerns, I have no doubt that his name is on the short list of people to call if there is a major outbreak of botulism. Malvy, Haim's wife, is a physician with the Veterans Administration.

They have two sons. One has a PhD in microbiology and is with DuPont Corporation specializing in ethanol. And the other son is a producer with a sports talk radio show, the one that I tune to listen to Baltimore Orioles baseball games. Haim and Malvy are grandparents and very proud of their nearly four-year-old grandson.

Haim serves this museum as a volunteer translating Holocaust-related documents from Romanian into English. He does this each Tuesday and Thursday for eight hours a day. In fact, I want to share with you something he told us earlier, that he's just completed translating 39 reels of tape of documents, mostly propaganda prepared by the Romanian Department of War in the early 1940s. That effort, over three years, took over 2,000 hours of translation. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Haim Solomon.

[APPLAUSE]

[WHISPERS]

[BACKGROUND NOISES] right there.

Haim, thank you very much for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person today. Haim, you described your early years before Germany and the Soviet Union signed their nonaggression pact and divided up Eastern Europe, you described that time as almost idyllic to me. Tell us why that was so, what that time was like for you and your family and your community before war began in Europe.

OK. Thank you first to everybody that's here. And I'll start my odyssey during the Holocaust in Romania, which consisted of hiding, moving, bribing, and good luck. It all started in Bivolari, a small little village in Northeastern Romania.

On the east side of the village ran the river Prut that separated a province called Bessarabia and was populated by a Russian-speaking population. That's important for later history. The village itself consisted of one unpaved, long street,

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection
graveled and one shorter one perpendicular to it and at the midpoint. Along the long street, Jews had stores, one after another and workshops for every need, like tailors, and cobblers, and butchers, and others.

On the short street to the west, the Jewish community built a Judeo-Roman elementary school, four grades, a communal bath, a matzo factory, and a few other institutions. Then we had a rabbi and four synagogues and a slaughterhouse for kosher meat. The teachers of the elementary school would teach us or prepare us on advanced classes at night. And twice a year we would travel to a larger city like Iasi to be examined and advance to the next grade.

Surrounding our village were several thousand peasants who had cows and sheep and goats and other animals that they could produce dairy products for us. And behind them was a big empty space, grassy knoll, where they sent their animals to pasture and where we engaged in sports activities. On market days, on Sunday and Monday, they would bring their products to the city, sell them, and with the money, come to Jewish stores and buy things.

On the right side, on the eastern side of that shorter street was a large space where the peasants would come in on the market days with their products. And, again, citizens of the village would go there to purchase their items. And they, too, would come to the stores to purchase their meat for their needs.

Haim, in describing that, you had described it to me as that the Jewish community and the surrounding peasant community and the others in the town, in many ways, you really needed each other--

Correct.

--and generally got along.

Yes.

Did you experience anti-Semitic behavior at all during that time?

Not openly. No one ventured out of the village at night or by himself. And relationship was more or less acceptable but cautious.

Tell us a little bit about your parents.

My father was a very astute person. He knew when to be first, when to be last, when to stay, when to go, et cetera. And mother was a saint and did like all mothers, protect.

And your daily life, you told me that it was strenuous. I mean, you didn't have water indoor. And so one of your jobs--tell us what your job was.

No running water and no electricity.

Right.

So one of my jobs was to go to the fountain and bring water and buckets, and split wood for fire and heat, and fill up the lamps with gasoline. It was one, some of my--

So generally, a hard life, but a good life generally--

Yes.

--in those years.

[INAUDIBLE].

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection
That, of course, Haim, would all change for you and your family. beginning August 23, 1939, when Germany and the Soviets made their deal to divide Eastern Europe. At that point, the Jews in your town of Bivolari were ordered to move to Iasi.

Yes.

Tell us about the move, what that was like for your family to literally pick up roots and move elsewhere.

I'm sure people in the audience saw The Fiddler on the Roof and familiar with Tevye, and people packing up what they could and leave the rest right there, like geese and ducks. And the Romanians, as you indicated, suspicious of our presence on the border with the Soviets who brought their armies to the Prut river, to their people, they said, they asked us, forced, told us, or expected us to leave.

So starting as a trickle, which is mostly the merchants in that long street, about half of this village packed up what we could and moved to Iasi. The others stayed behind. And a year later were taken to Iasi in the big pogrom that we experienced in Iasi later.

This was 1940 already. And things were quiet, except that all the rumors and all the witnesses that told about Germany bringing into Romania large numbers of hundreds of trains, of large numbers of ammunition and soldiers to get ready, later in 1941, to invade the Soviet Union.

So we moved to Iasi early in 1940. And moved into an apartment on a corner street, three streets corner. That was a very lucky choice later on. Iasi was quiet for a while, until June 1941.

Before we go there, let me just ask you a couple more questions, Haim.

Yes.

Why were the Romanian authorities suspicious of Jews enough to say you have to leave Bivolari? What were they suspicious about?

They used to go around telling that of the 24 Politburo members in the Soviet Union, 16 were Jews. So by implication--

You were loyal to the Soviets.

--Communists or Bolsheviks. Or a book like Pearl Buck's books was suspicious.

Pearl Buck's books?

Yes. Well, for something like that, you could spend days under arrest.

Haim, when you picked up-- you alluded to Fiddler on the Roof, when your family took everything you could from the store--

And the household.

--and the house. And you left some things with the person who had been a nanny helping you out.

Correct.

Will you say just a little bit about that?

Well, Valita raised me. She lived, well, the peasants lived around the village. But when this happened, we gave her the keys and asked her to move in, which she didn't want, but she did.

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

So essentially was able to take over your household, what you had left behind?

Correct. And she was very familiar with it.

Once you got to Iasi, was your father, was the family able to go back to work? What happened once you got there?

Just like in Bivolari, where the father and the two older brothers moved into the business area, opened a yard good store. This is before the ready made stuff. Anyone that needed pants or shirts had to buy garment, then take it to a tailor, and a tailor produced or prepared the item.

Iasi was a larger city, about 100,000 people of which Jews were 50,000, plus all the new immigrants [INAUDIBLE] from the villages, on the border of villages. The Jewish population was up to 60 or 70,000. But Iasi was also a center of virulent anti-Semitism, the center of the Iron Guard, very, very vicious.

The Iron Guard was the Fascist Party there.

Yes.

Haim, tell us a little bit about your family, your brothers. There were five children--

Yes.

--and your parents, all seven of you were together living in Iasi at this time. So the whole family was able to move.

Correct. In fact, the boys, we came with a truck. And the parents came by bus.

And of course, all of that would just change dramatically, even though you'd already had one major change of being forced to move to Iasi. But once the Germans, as they were massing to do, invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the Jews in Iasi, thousands and thousands of them as you described, were subjected to a vicious pogrom. Would you tell us what happened and what a pogrom is?

1941, June 21, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. And German tanks and singing soldiers were marching all over the city. We stayed indoors and watched them from windows.

On June 26, the Soviet Union Air Force bombed the train station in Iasi. And many victims they suffered. But the Germans or the Romanians insisted that Jewish communists signaled the Soviets where to drop their bombs. So they initiated a vicious, barbaric, animalistic pogrom in Iasi with a scenario that they utilized in many other occasions. They asked the Jews to come to the city hall and exchange their old identification cards with new ones.

Once they got there, and because soldiers and policemen kept bringing waves of more and more Jews, they asked them across the street. The police center had a big yard surrounded by a stone wall. And as they entered from the city hall to that stone yard, stone wall yard, aligned on both sides were Romanians, Germans, Romanian, German, et cetera. That was for the Germans to teach the Romanians what to do.

And as the Jews passed by, they either split their heads or shot them in the temple. Because the Jews were holding their hands up. So that the yard, the courtyard of that police station filled up with dead or dying Jews.

My two brothers, Reuven and Henry, they slept in the store about 10 blocks away from the house. And they decided to go to the city hall to get their new identification cards. Reuven lost his card, old ID card, and went into a relative to inquire. And they convinced him not to go anyplace.

But Henry kept going. And as he entered and passed through all these Germans and Romanian guards, he found himself next to the back wall. And as night started, they jumped over the wall and looked for a nice place or a good place to

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection
hide. They found a house with a big cross painted on it, which tells us that the whole thing was scheduled and prepared and not immediately orchestrated. So they went into the--

So there was a cross painted on it saying leave this one alone?

Correct.

Yeah.

They went into the yard and found a shed with firewood stacked all the way to the ceiling. They removed the top layer and crawled into it and replaced the layers so that guards, Germans came to look and they saw the wood up to the ceiling and left. So they sat, laid there, lie there quietly for five, six days.

Back to the yard, the police and the Germans shooting people or wounding them, for a day before the 29th between 1 o'clock and 6, 7 o'clock in the evening, they killed 4,000 people coming in to that yard. The next day they brought in their trash disposal, or garbage removal carts, those were horse drawn carts, to remove the dead and take them to the Jewish cemetery.

The rest of the Jews, they walked them to the train station. And there filled up train cars that would hold 50, 60 people. They put in 120 in each cart and started them on a long travel, a long trip that went back and forth in the July 29th, June 29, July 1 under the heat, in the heat, and without water.

Half of them were dead when they arrived in the first village, [PLACE NAME]. They removed the dead. But then did not leave the 60 or so people by themselves. No, they brought in more from back cart to, again, fill up the train with 100 or 120 people.

Things quieted down after five, six days. And we started getting out of the house.

Tell us, Haim, over six or seven days, somewhere around 11,000 Jews were murdered.

To be exact, 13,260.

13,260. Haim, tell us how you and the others in your family managed to not get caught up in that.

Yes. As I said, brothers were away from their house and from our father. So they decided to go. At the house where my father owed, he indicated no one is going. And none of the neighbors would go.

So this corner house that we had with three streets had three entrances. So that when they came to look for us, Mother would stay with the daughters, would stay out and indicate, tell them that we already went.

And that was good for them. Because among the dead, there were 40 women and over 100 children. Those were families that would not separate. They would all go together. So there were 40 women and 110 children among the victims.

So the vast majority were Jewish men that they--

Correct.

--males.

Mostly Jewish male.

Yeah. And when the Germans or the Romanians came to look for you, because you had multiple exits, you were going out the back exits.

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

We were out one, another exit when they came through one of them. That basement also had small windows. And we could look out and see Jews being marched and kicked and shot if they couldn't move faster. The rabbi of the nearby temple was killed on the street and left there. At night, some neighbors went to take him in, bring him in.

After five, six days, we started moving out of the hiding. The streets were still empty and eerie and scary. Cats, dogs were licking blood from puddles.

And though somehow order was established, soon after the Romanian authorities asked that every Jewish family send or submit one volunteer, so to speak, to do forced labor. At such a meeting when the officer asked for someone that can do bookkeeping, I raised my hand. And he took me to his office, which was in a formerly Jewish hospital, but now occupied by Romanian and German troops, wounded. It was already 10 days of war. And they kept bringing wounded people.

It was a little scary in that job. But the officer needed my expertise. And he would come and pick me up under the curfew and bring me home late at night. After a year or so, June 1942, July '42, he stopped coming for me. And I stopped going.

And when you first told me about this, this German officer just eventually didn't come for you anymore and you stopped going, and you told me the fact that you weren't doing the forced labor you were supposed to be doing wasn't noticed. And you had thought that was due to just bureaucracy, right? They just-- you were lost somehow.

No. I guess he learned the trick, that his choices were well-bribed and arranged. So he must have found another volunteer, another--

And the rest of your family is still intact--

Yes.

--at this point. And no one else was forced at that time to do forced labor. Right?

Not yet.

And you would spend then several years under these circumstances living in Iasi.

Right. My father and the older boys, older brothers were able to open the store and continue business as in the little village with the same customers who now became merchants themselves. So they would drive another 50 kilometers to Iasi to come to us.

Is this when you were forced to start wearing yellow stars?

Yes, we had the star, started wearing yellow stars. And to avoid going out or encountering military people, the Germans-- it was natural. If you saw Germans in front of you coming, you would cross the street. But they would do the same to encounter you, scare you.

Just intimidation and harassment, things like that? You would stay would stay living under these circumstances in Iasi for almost five years.

'40 to '44.

Until June of '44. And then you picked up again and moved to Bucharest.

The Russians advanced starting in Stalingrad. They advanced in their offensive and came up to the river Prut and stopped there for a long time. We don't know why.

But they kept sending or starting rumors that Iasi would be fought street by street. And they will decide when to do it. So we decided, or my father decided it's time to leave. And, again, we filled up a truck with everything and moved to Iasi, this time 600 kilometers southwest and moved to Bucharest.

With the whole family, again?

Yes, the whole family in one truck. Bucharest was full of activity. The Russians were at the Prut. And they expected them every day. So Germans were retreating. Romanian soldiers were running away, running home.

And everybody was expecting the Russians every day, every minute. Early in the fall of 1945, they did arrive and liquidated the government, opened the prisons, and brought out all the communists and socialists and formed a new government, where they insisted to have representation from every ethnic minority. We Jews were represented by Rabbi Safran, who protected us but also advised everybody to start thinking of emigrating.

And soon enough, when the Russians came, they were friendly and nice to be with. They liked to sing, and to drink, and so on.

The Soviets liked to sing and drink and left you generally alone?

Yes. But as the rabbi advised, I had two years, '45 to '47, where I could continue my education and finish high school and graduate. And by 1947, I was ready for taking off.

Before we go past the war, the Soviets came into Bucharest. But the war was still going on elsewhere in Europe.

Absolutely.

And so you're liberated. But everyone isn't everywhere else. Describe for me what you told me about the American waves of bombers that were passing over then.

Oh, yes. The Americans were already in Italy. And Romanians, the main source of oil was in a city north of Bucharest, Ploiesti. So the American bombers had to pass Bucharest. And we would lie on the ceiling, on the roofs and wave. They didn't see us.

You described them as beautiful formations of American planes going over. And you'd wave at them.

Yes, of course, they always came on a triangle. And at some point, they spread out.

The raids on Ploiesti were really important, weren't they--

Absolutely.

--in the whole war effort?

All the tanks and all the vehicles were dependent on that oil. And the Germans took most of it.

When the Russians came in, were you pretty well-- I think you were pretty well free of any heavy fighting in there.

Yes.

You weren't at terrible risk of war around you once the Soviets came in. No, they moved towards Hungary, Yugoslavia.

At that time, you're under the Soviets. The war's still going on. Did you begin to really know what had happened to Jews elsewhere in Europe at that time?

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

Not really.

Not really?

Not yet, just whatever the Western press would send to us.

As you started to tell us, once the war was over for you and then once the war was completely over, you were able to resume your education and prepare for your own departure for Palestine. Tell us about that time for you as you thought about emigrating and leaving and picking up stakes and going.

It was a real relaxation. And you could roam the streets. And during the evenings, the Russians were not to be seen. But the Romanian patrols were keeping order. Restaurants were open late, and movie houses, and so on.

Tell us about the Soviet soldiers and watches.

Oh, the Soviets were brought up to not know the time of day or the day of the month. They didn't know where they were.

By their superiors, by their officers, to keep them in the dark. Yeah.

Exactly. So their first attraction were watches. And they would ask Russian or in Romanian what time it is. no matter what you told him, he wanted to see it.

And the minute he saw it, he took it. And kept on conversation what to do with it. Watch, he wants to put it in a jacket. And the jacket is full of other watches. So it was one of the specialties that they engaged. They liked watches.

[LAUGHTER]

Haim, tell us about your departure, when you finally were ready to go and made your trip. Tell us about your trip.

Oh, in the middle of 1947, a huge Aliyah, which means emigration, illegal immigration to Palestine at the time, was starting to be organized in Romania for mostly Romanian Jews, but also many that came from Poland and Hungary and Czechoslovakia. So slowly, slowly, they fixed up two large boats that we brought here into shelving, like people could not sit or stand, only lie down.

And in the meantime, they divided or gave out passage for various organizations, Zionist organizations. I was one of, in the organization, the general Zionists ready to prepare for emigration. On December 22, we boarded a large train to take us to Constanta, a port city on the Black Sea on the Eastern side of Romania. The train was supposed to travel there with 16,000 emigrants for two ships.

Then the British government insisted and pressed the Romanians to not participate or facilitate such an illegal and dangerous Aliyah or trip. And they threatened the Romanians, I guess. So the Romanian foreign minister told them that no illegal immigration is departing from Romanian ports.

Accordingly, the train, instead of going east, started out going south to Bulgaria. And the boats in the Black Sea traveled to a port called Burgas in Southern Bulgaria. We arrived there after 12 hours. And within 10 hours, 16,000 people boarded the two ships. And we started the slow, arduous trip.

That Burgas port is near the Bosphorus Strait. We crossed the Bosphorus into the Marmara Sea. And then from there, by the Dardanelles, we passed into the Aegean.

After the Aegean straits came the Mediterranean. And there, the British Navy was waiting for us. They followed us until we got near Haifa, five, six miles from there. And there, having received orders from Israel not to put up any defense

because an earlier ship they battled with the British, and so they took us to Cyprus.

And before you go on about Cyprus, there were 16,000 of you on two ships, 8,000 per ship. And during the day, you were not allowed to go on top, right?

No, just lie.

Lie, because you had no room to stand, just crowded in the holds of these ships.

Correct. But luckily, the ships were bought from Panama or one of the countries here. And they were ships where fruit were transported. So they were well-aerated and refrigerated. And 8,000 people could roam around.

But survived it.

Survived.

So the British force you to Cyprus. And now you're a prisoner.

Now we are prisoners in Cyprus, the proverbial from the frying pan into the fire. Cyprus is a beautiful island, 80% Greek, 20% Turkish. If you see it on a map, it looks like a gun pointing at Syria.

On arrival, I joined the Haganah in Cyprus, where all the feuding Zionist groups could integrate as equals. The camps were surrounded by two barbed wire fences with rows of barbed wire between them. Those walls are called concertina. Because if you split them, they start running and making noise or music.

Every 200 yards, they had post guards. And the British would not come into the camps. We were housed-- our camps were called the summer camps, even though they were in the north part of the island because we were housed in tents. And 20 miles south were the winter camps because they were housed in Quonset houses.

The British soldiers would not come into the camps. But Greek laborers would service them on a daily basis. The camps were managed by the Joint Committee, plus a select number of internees, locally selected.

But we in the Haganah were conducted with, managed by emissaries from Israel who were allowed into the camps as doctors or teachers, et cetera. In reality, they were well-trained military experts. So they divided our days into three activities, paramilitary exercises, hand-to-hand battle, and Hebrew studies of Bible and literature. And the third activity, the most important one was to study or to prepare how to escape the camps.

During the nights, we would study the movements of the guards, when they eat, when they sleep, and so on, and observe the size of the moon and the places where such escapes would be possible. At night, well, first of all, I trained as a partner in a pair that would approach the fence and cut an opening, crawl into that concertina so that when you split it, it doesn't run, and open the other part, the other fence and start bringing out youngsters. By this time, the camp's held about 40, 50,000 prisoners.

So the British would allow women, pregnant women, sick people, elder people, young children out, but not military age youngsters. So our direction, our intent was to bring out military age youngsters. So when we approached the fences and opened, we would bring out 8, 9, to 10 youngsters, then tie up the fences and retreat to wait for developments.

The British were alert. And they discovered that the arrangement was that the youngsters would raise their hands and surrender. And the guard would take them to their command posts and interrogate them for how do you organize and how do you prepare for this escape. The final punishment was to take you to the winter camps, if this happened in the summer camps, and vice versa.

If the action succeeded, the youngsters were to crawl some distance, then get up and walk for half a mile, for the rest of the trip to the road that passed in front of the camps about a mile away. Then they would lie in the grass. And between

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection
1:00 and 2:00 at night, a truck would pass by. All these exits, all these escapes were so guided to correspond to the entrance to the camp.

So the truck would stop and turn off the lights. Then the passenger would come out and whistle an Israeli song. So the youngsters would run into the truck. And the truck would drive them to a warehouse, huge warehouse in an orange grove where some other kids from previous nights or from another camp would be there.

And when 80 or 90 youngsters were gathered together, Israeli fishing boats with licenses to fish in Turkish waters, because the northern part of Cyprus faces Turkey, and by prearranged light signs, flashlights or other lights, they would send us out to rubber boats, rubber rafts to pick up the kids into the fishing boat.

Haim, if you don't mind, and just in the interest of time, too, you yourself would end up trying to escape. You would take your third attempt before you were successful.

Correct.

And I want you to tell us about the time when you were interrogated and you began to sing your song. But before we get to that, Haim escaped, got out through the fence. And then they were to hide, as he described. And they found during the day a deep hole in the ground to hide in.

But it just so happened some passing British soldiers were playing soccer with a tin can. And one of them made an errant kick that landed in the hole. They went to retrieve it and got a sound beating out of that and put back into camp. But tell us about your--

Well, two soldiers found us. They were scared themselves. So they were shooting in the air. They were shouting.

They took us out. We were 10 youngsters. And they took us to their command post, this time interrogating a little harsher, with some beatings, and so on.

I was on my second part of the escape. And when I arrived in the other camps, they dressed me up nicely. So they thought I am the leader.

So after a good beating, they put me in a room, a cold, dark room, December 28, 1948. And that's it. I shivered, but I started feeling better and started to sing.

When the British captain comes in and yells at me, you bloody Jew. You love life. I like that.

So he threw me my clothes, dress up, and wait outside. Wait, next room. And the others were already there. And they took us to the summer camps from where I originally escaped.

This time, the third time when I escaped, I was already-- one of the escapees made arrangements with my superiors I'm not coming back. So the third time, the escape was successful. And an Israeli fishing boat called Karish took us to Israel.

It was already Israel. That was our main anger, because Israel had declared independence in May. And here we were in December. They were still holding us in Cyprus.

I was singing a song known to many, "Am Yisrael Chai." The people of Israel lived. And to this day, I don't know why that captain was so impressed with my singing.

[LAUGHTER]

Haim, of course, as you said, you would make it to Israel. And you would be very active in the Haganah, the Jewish armed forces, and ended up working in a hospital, dealing with wounded and injured.

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.

https://collections.ushmm.org
Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection
Military hospital.

And then some time later would make it to the United States after Israel got its independence. Yes.

Mhm.

Haim, I think we're close to our 2 o'clock time. So one, we won't have time to ask Haim questions here. But when he finishes, if you want to ask him a question or meet him, he'll step down off the stage over here. So absolutely please feel free to do that. I want to thank Haim for spending-- and before I turn back to him to close our program-- thank him for being here today.

I want to thank all of you for joining us. I want to remind you that we will resume First Person program-- our final program's next week, the 26th, and I'll come back to that in just a moment. But we will begin a new season of First Person next March, lasting until the end of August. So if your travels bring you back to Washington, we hope you will join us.

Our final First Person program for 2009 will be next Wednesday, August 26, when our First Person will be Mr. Henry Greenbaum. Henry, who is from Poland, survived living in a ghetto, being a slave laborer, Auschwitz, and then eventually survived a death march. I'd like to remind you that you can access excerpts from our First Person programs as podcasts on the museum website, or through iTunes.

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

All right, I would like to thank you for bringing us back. And I'd like to thank Ellen Blalock and Rachel Wagner in charge of Survivors' Affairs, and Carly, who is here today. I'm not trying to name her last name, because she just got married and I can't pronounce it.

And I liked the audience to be very thankful for choosing to come here. There are so many beautiful museums on this National Mall for every endeavor, human endeavor. But you picked, you choose to come here. And whether you know it or not, you've become witnesses now and your children and your children's children.

Because under the surface of so-called quiet, there are, again, globalized anti-Semitism that leads to disaster. The Germans say yes, there was a Holocaust. We did it. We know.

The Iranians say no, there was no Holocaust. It's just a rumor. So anti-Semitism is going now global. And there is no remedy, they say, for it but for groups like you come here and experience, see it or hear it firsthand. We won't be here too long, I'm talking about survivors. So it's in your hands to publicize it, to prevent it, to bring about the reasonable, acceptable lifestyle for people of different religions, different colors, different orientations. So thank you very much for coming.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you, Haim.

This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word generated with 3Play Media.
It is not the primary source, and it may contain errors in spelling or accuracy.