

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 today.

We are in our 11th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Charlene Schiff. We shall meet Mrs. Schiff shortly. This 2010 season of First Person is made possible through the Louis and Dora 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 accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. With few exceptions, we will have a First Person program each Wednesday through August 25. We will also have First Person programs on Tuesdays through July.

The museum's website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of the upcoming First Person guests. Excerpts from First Person programs are available as podcasts on the museum's website. They are also available through iTunes. Charlene's podcast from 2009 is currently posted on the website and will be updated from today's program shortly.

Charlene 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 a few questions of Charlene. We ask that you stay in your seats throughout our one hour program. That way we minimize any disruptions for Charlene as she is speaking. For those of you who may have passes for the permanent exhibition today, they are good for the time shown on your pass. But they're also good for any time after that.

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. Six 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. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades.

What you are about to hear from Charlene 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 was Shulamit Perlmutter. Charlene was born in Poland on December 16, 1929. The arrow on this map of Europe points to Poland. She 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. And this is a picture of the market square in Horochow. Note the wooden synagogue in the background. And I think we might hear a little bit more about that in a little while.

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 remembers was having to speak Russian in school.

In 1941, Germany invaded the USSR. And they 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 all night as machine gunfire 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 forests.

On June 25, 1948, Charlene arrived in the United States having sailed on the Marine Flasher, which we see in this photograph. And we close with this contemporary photograph of Charlene, standing in front of the steps to her elementary school in Horochow.

Charlene came to the United States in 1948, as I mentioned. She would later marry Ed Schiff, who was in the reserves, was called back to active duty, and assigned to Germany. Once Charlene became a United States citizen, she joined Ed in Germany. She was an army wife for 28 years.

Ed, who retired as a colonel, was appointed an honorary Brigadier General and served as a military aide to the two most recent former Virginia governors, Tim Kaine and Mark Warner. And I'm very sorry to say that Ed passed away in 2008.

Charlene lives in Northern Virginia. She and Ed had one son, Stephen, and two grandsons, Perry and Morgan, ages 18 and 16, both of whom Charlene notes are very sports-minded.

She has been speaking about her Holocaust experience since 1985 and speaks frequently to schools and universities. Last year she spent a memorable week in Alaska speaking to high school students, civic and church groups in several communities. At one high school, 500 of 504 students showed up to hear her speak. Just recently she spoke at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, where her grandson Perry is a freshman.

Charlene is especially proud that she was asked by the White House to be one of three survivors from the United States to be part of a six person US delegation at the commemoration of the 65th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in Poland this past January. Charlene is also a contributor to the museum's publication, Echoes of Memory, which features writings by survivors who participate in the museum's writing program for survivors. After today's class, Charlene will be available to sign copies of Echoes of Memory, which is also available in the museum's bookstore.

You'll be interested to know that Charlene had visited, on a monthly basis, wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Hospital with her husband and is no longer able to make the trips there as she was able to until a couple of years ago. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Charlene Schiff.

[APPLAUSE]

(WHISPERING) Yeah, that's fine.

Charlene, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person. Thank you for being here. You have so much to share with us. So we should really start right away. And what I'd like to do, Charlene, is perhaps have you begin by telling us a little bit about those years, your first 10 years before war began, what they were like for you, what your family was like, and what your town was like before war came.

First of all, I want to welcome everyone who is here. Thank you for giving us your time. It's very important for all survivors to tell their story, to bear witness. Because pretty soon there will be no more survivors left. And we must bear witness, tell our story, and also appeal to our young people to become involved and not to be bystanders.

My first 10, actually 9 years before the war started, were very peaceful and idyllic. We lived in a very small town named Horochow in Eastern Poland. I had a five-year-old sister, a five-year older sister than I. And she was actually a musical prodigy.

When I came around, I was actually mostly a tomboy. I don't know if that was something that made me stronger and sturdier later on. But it was a peaceful life.

We did coexist in harmony with our Christian neighbors. Because in our town, everyone who was a civic leader, and my parents were civic leaders, we tried to help and to get involved with the entire community, not just the Jews.

Just to give you an example, my mother and some of her friends organized summer camps for poor children. Now there were summer camps for Jewish children and summer camps for Christian children. The reason they were separate was

because of the dietary laws that the Jewish children required. But other than that, they were the same for all poor children.

And because of this cooperation among all the community, we lived in peace. And when people ask me, I don't remember any anti-Semitism that I experienced in my young life in my little town of Horochow. But that all changed when the Germans came in. And that didn't happen until 1941.

Charlene, you described to us what sounded like a pretty wonderful life, an idyllic life.

Yes.

And of course, we're going to talk about what happened when the Germans came.

But for almost two years you were under the domination of the Soviets. Tell us who at that time was like for you.

Well, actually, as a child, I don't remember many changes. I know that there were many, many changes in our little town. My father still kept his position at the university. And the only thing I remember is that our language, the official language became Russian instead of Polish. But the area I come from changes regimes so often that most people are bi or trilingual out of necessity. And consequently, changing the official language from Polish to Russian was not a very big deal.

I'm sure that there were many, many other changes. But as a child, I do not remember. And I was not cognizant of them.

And as you noted, your father was able to continue as a professor.

Yes.

So life was relatively normal.

That's right.

But of course, all that would change dramatically when the Germans turned on the Russians and attacked your portion of Poland. And life changed immediately.

Well, of course, there was an agreement between Hitler, that's Germany, and Stalin, that's Russia, the Soviet Union. And when Hitler broke the agreement in the summer, early summer of 1941, Hitler and Germany began their pursuit of all their evil goals. Our little town, Horochow, became occupied by the Germans almost immediately.

I remember long columns of foot soldiers, tanks, artillery. And everything changed at that time. The very sad thing was that our former neighbors and friends with whom we lived in harmony for all these years before the war, they became our enemy overnight. They greeted the Germans with flowers and cheers. They were glad that the Soviets left and the Germans came in.

In the very beginning, the first thing the Germans did-- Nazis, I shouldn't really say Germans-- the Nazis did was they rounded up 300 Jewish leaders, my father among them. They had a list with names. And they went door to door to get all the leaders together.

That was the last time I saw my father. When they took the 300 people away, first of all, we questioned how did they know the names of the leaders. Obviously, former neighbors and former friends supplied that list to the Germans.

Charlene, you told me that when the SS came to get your father, that he was a very dignified man and--

Very formal, yes.

Tell us he wanted to get his jacket.

My father was in shirtsleeves. And when they came to take him away, he wanted to put on his suit jacket. And they wouldn't even allow him to do that. We never said any proper goodbyes.

The look on my father's face when they took him away was that of love. And I could not see anything else. And this is the way I want to remember my wonderful father. But we never even had a chance to say goodbye.

Do you know, Charlene, what happened to him?

Well, there are two versions. And I don't know which one is the right one. One version was that my father and the group of the 300 leaders of my hometown, Horochow, ended up in the concentration camp Dachau. We did research later, my husband and I, and we didn't find any sign that they ended up in Dachau. To this day, I don't know.

The second version was that the 300 leaders were marched right outside my hometown Horochow. They were ordered to dig a mass grave. They were ordered to disrobe. And they were murdered the very same day.

I don't know what really happened. But it doesn't matter. I lost my father very early in my life. And to this day, I'm grieving for him.

Charlene, your father, of course, being a noted professor and intellectual had a renowned book collection. Can you say a bit about that?

Well, after they took my father away, we were still in our own home until we were dragged into the ghetto. And one day a van pulled up. And several Germans burst into our house and asked where is my father's library, private library?

Now, again, how did the Germans know about the private library? Well, our former friends and neighbors must have told them. My mother showed them the room, the library.

My father's collection of books was quite well-known. He was collecting first editions and rare books in all sorts of different languages. The Germans came. And they cleaned out the library and drove off.

This was, again, one sine of one act of our neighbors who became our enemy. And it's very sad. My town was, actually, there were approximately 5,000 Jewish people and about 10,000 Christians. A lot of them were Polish. And a lot of them were Ukrainian.

What I didn't know until very recently is that the Polish inhabitants of my town, who were really our friends and our colleagues, my father's colleagues, were evacuated involuntarily to Central Poland the same time that the Jews were herded into the ghetto. And this is something I wish my mother had known. My mother in the ghetto always wondered why our friends didn't extend a helping hand and they did not help us in the ghetto. But just recently I found out that they were evacuated-- I mean, they were transferred involuntarily. And so there was no chance for them to extend the helping hand.

Charlene, as you noted, you would then be taken into a ghetto.

Yes.

You, your mother. And your sister, and that would be the first ghetto you went into.

Yes.

Tell us what life was like for you once you were there.

Well, first of all, the way it was executed was that everything was announced on a loudspeaker. And that morning, that

early morning, my sister and my mother had to report to slave labor. Everyone over 14 years of age had to report for slave labor.

We were ordered to wear a yellow Star of David on the front and on the back of our clothing. The Nazis wanted to see us coming and going. And a few weeks after the Germans came in, I'm not quite sure of the date, but there was an announcement before people reported to slave labor.

And the announcement said that all the Jews have to congregate in the market square. That was a central area. And we could bring with us only what we could carry with us. And that was it.

And so we tried to take whatever we could with us to the market square. There, we were told that we are going into a special place. Before all this happened, I must make sure that you realize what the Germans were doing. From the very first day that they arrived into our town, there were always, every day, there were things that we had to part with, give to the Germans, gold, silver, nickel, paintings, Persian rugs, bicycles, musical instruments, anything of value.

And radios.

And radios-- we had-- and telephones we had to give to the Germans. So by the time the order came to go to that special place, which was the ghetto, we barely had any possessions at all. When we came to the market square and everyone congregated there with their possessions that they could carry, we were marched to one of the poorest section of town and assigned a space to live.

I'll never forget that we were assigned, my mother, my sister, and I, to a house, to a room with three other families. I don't recall exactly if this was a two or three story house. But I do recall that we ended up in one room with three other families. There was not enough space to have everyone sleep on the floor. And so the older people had to build bunk beds so that we would be able to accommodate everyone.

I also remember that in that house there were approximately 100 people. And all of that, all of us, we had only one kitchen, a very primitive kitchen, and one very primitive bathroom for 100 people. That was absolutely awful.

But somehow we did try to survive. My mother was a magician. Those people who worked received a small food ration. Children like I did not receive any food. Mother and sister shared the little bit that they received with me. And mother was a magician, what she could do with two potatoes and a pot of water was unbelievable, but I guess we were so hungry that everything tasted quite good.

When we got into the ghetto, there was a lot of chaos. People were coming and going. And at that time, about 20 young kids my age and younger even, we did get together and we built what we call euphemistically a tunnel. It was a hole that went under the fences to the outside of the ghetto.

The ghetto was completely enclosed. High wooden fences were covered, topped with barbed wire. And there were only two gates in the ghetto guarded 24-7. And one needed a written permit to enter or exit the ghetto.

And because of that, we dug that tunnel, a hole that went under the fence of the ghetto outside. Outside the exit was a dilapidated old kiosk where they used to sell newspapers. The roof was gone, but the rounded walls were perfect for our exit from the ghetto.

One time we took turns, the kids, of getting out of the ghetto and trying to get some food to bring back to our families. One time it was my turn to get out via the tunnel. And I was lucky to buy two eggs for a small gold and ruby ring, my mother's.

I was walking back. It was summer. And I remember I was wearing a summer dress with puff sleeves. And I put an egg in each puff. And I walked nonchalantly trying to get to the kiosk in order to get back to the ghetto.

If one was found outside the ghetto without a written permit, the guards were told to kill you. I was almost near the

kiosk when I was apprehended by a guard. He searched me. And he found the two eggs.

He threw them on the sidewalk and rubbed my face in them until I was bleeding. And he kept screaming, get back where you belong. Don't ever come out again.

He was one of the kind-hearted, wonderful guards. He gave me back my life. My face healed. And I was happy to be alive.

A few days later, it was my friend's turn, a little girl, to go outside via the tunnel. She was lucky to find a half a loaf of bread. I don't know if she had money or jewelry. But she did get a half a loaf of bread.

And she was also walking towards the kiosk in order to get back to the ghetto. But a guard apprehended her, searched her, found the bread and murdered her right then and there. She was not quite 11 years old. This is the way life went on in the ghetto.

Charlene, before we turn to the next place you would go, tell us a little bit about the work that your mother and sister were made to do. And then what happened when you stood in for your sister because she was ill.

My mother was a teacher by profession also. But she was busy raising two young daughters. But anyway, her slave labor was digging ditches and fixing roads.

My sister was very lucky to be assigned to what they called the knitting factory. That was a group of older girls who worked in a warehouse knitting articles of clothing for the German soldiers on the front. One day my sister came home from work very ill. She had a high fever. And she was quite ill.

At that time, there were no more hospitals, no more doctors, no more pharmacies in the ghetto. And so we had to rely on our own ways how to keep strong and healthy. My mother learned that using slices of raw potato applied to your forehead would bring down the high fever. She stayed up all night long. And she kept putting slices of raw potato to my sister's forehead. I went to sleep.

But when I got up in the morning, my mother was ready to go to work. But my sister was still quite ill. And at that time, even though I was five years younger than my sister, I suggested to my mother to allow me to take my sister's place for that one day.

Food, you see, they did get the rations every day. And food was very important to us. If my sister didn't report for work, she wouldn't get the food ration. Well, I did persuade my mom that it would be all right.

You see, my sister would come home every day and tell us how lucky she was that she worked in a covered place. It was in a warehouse. And that the guards were quite lenient, all they were concerned is to read your name and record your presence, and then they left you alone.

And so I convinced my mom that there would be no danger for me to take my sister's place. In the morning, we left my sister still ill in the room. Mother and I walked out. Mother joined her group. She showed me where the older girls congregated.

And the older girls took me in. We walked to the warehouse outside the ghetto. Most of the slave work was outside the ghetto.

And then they showed me where my sister was sitting. I took my place. I took her place.

And then the guard was reading the names. When it came to my sister's name, I said present. I picked up the two knitting needles and started knitting. I don't remember what I was knitting, but it was something simple, probably a scarf or gloves or whatever.

Everything went fine. But my exquisite bad timing happened very, very early that morning. All of a sudden, there was a covered truck with Germans. They decided to have an inspection of the knitting factory on that day. Several Germans burst in and positioned themselves all over the warehouse.

Excuse me. One German stood behind me and watched me for a little while. And then started screaming Schneller, Schneller, meaning faster, faster. And the more he yelled, the slower I was knitting.

Then he turned around. And I'll never forget his face. He was red as a beet. And there was foam coming out of his mouth.

And he cursed and yelled at me and right in front-- spitting right in front of my face. I wished I could have disappeared, but I did not. And the more he yelled, the slower I was knitting.

And finally, he became so exasperated, he pulled the two knitting needles out of my hands and stuck one of them in my right forefinger. I passed out. And that was the end for the day for me.

In the evening, when the other girls finished their work, they told me I was absolutely very lucky that this guy did not kill me. Sadly, I did not get the food ration that day, which was my goal to begin with. And there were no antibiotics or anything. My finger became infected and consequently, I lost the tip of my right forefinger. This is just one example of how sadistic and mean the Germans were and how they treated people in the ghetto.

Charlene, from there, you would be forcibly then taken to another ghetto. And it was at that point that your mother made a very profound decision that she would try to save the three of you and concocted a plan to do that. Tell us about that move and what her plan was and then what happened with it.

Yeah. Well, rumors started flying that the ghetto would be liquidated that summer. That was now 1942. We were transferred from the first ghetto to a second ghetto, much smaller. Because obviously, the population dwindled considerably and there were many less of us.

This new ghetto became enclosed as the old one was. But it was enclosed only on three sides. The fourth side was a river that separated our town from a neighboring village.

My mother, my sister, and I were lucky to be assigned a space to live in a house right on the river. The river was a natural barrier. And consequently, the Germans didn't feel that they had to put fences and barbed wire there.

My mother had still some contacts outside. And she was lucky to locate two farmers. She couldn't find one who was willing to hide three people. But one farmer was willing to hide one person, and the other, two people.

And now my mother had to make the difficult decision how to divide our little family. And in her infinite wisdom, she decided that my sister who was five years older than I could manage in the farmer's place, the one who wanted to give us one space for hiding. And then mother and I would go to the other farmer's place.

One morning in 1942, early summer, I said goodbye to my terrific big sister. And she was going to go. The plan was for her to go to the hiding place right after work.

My mother came back from work. And we didn't hear anything from my sister. We waited several days. There was no news.

And that was good. That meant that she arrived at her destination without any incident or we would have heard about it. And at that time, when my mother came home from work a few days after my sister left, she said for me to put on my best clothes and shoes. And she packed a small bundle for herself and for me. And we were going to leave the ghetto.

She kept giving me instructions how to get to the farmer's place. But I knew the farmer from before the war. We used to buy dairy products from him. And one of his daughters actually attended the same classes in the same school as I did.

So I knew where he lived.

And then I said Mom, why are you giving me directions? We're going to be there together. Well, that night, after we shared our meager dinner, and it was very dark, we left our room. And a few steps from the house there was the river.

We ended up in the bulrushes. And the water was up to my chest, to my chin. My mother was quite tall, so she wasn't worried about that. But I had the water all the way to my chin.

We were trying to work our way across the river in order to enter to go to the farmers place. But all of a sudden, shots rang out. And we couldn't move. It was very quiet in between. And any sound would have given us away. And so we stayed in the river, in the bulrushes all night long. It was very, very tiring.

In the morning, other people also tried to enter the river in order to cross the river to get out from the ghetto. But at that time, the machine guns were working full-time. And I remember the sound and the words of the guards. They kept yelling, Jew, come out. We can see you.

And most of the people in the river came out with their hands, with their arms up. And soon before noon at that time, I would say, the river was red. Because the guards killed everyone who came out of the river, who was in the river, you know.

I wanted to do it, too. Because it was very cumbersome and very tiring to stand up and even to sleep. I had to be standing up. My mother supported me with her arms and hands so I wouldn't fall over.

But my mother tried to humor me. And to this day, I feel so guilty that I gave my mother such a hard time. We stayed in the river for a number of days. I don't remember if it was 4 or 5 days. And meanwhile, we saw smoke. We heard screams. And we saw fire coming from the ghetto. The Nazis were liquidating the ghetto.

I kept dozing off. I was very tired. And I remember one time my mother gave me some soggy bread. And she insisted I had to eat it to keep strong. And I gave her a hard time. And I didn't want to eat it, but she insisted I must do that.

One time, and I don't know if it was four or five days after we entered the river, when I dozed off with support from my mother, and then I woke up. And my mother had vanished. I felt like screaming and crying. But I knew I could not do that. I could not give away the place where I was hiding. By that time, that evening, all became quiet. I guess the Nazis liquidated the ghetto.

I felt, and I tried to reason with myself, that my mother probably couldn't wake me when it was time to leave. And she went to the farmer by herself. And she felt since I knew the way that I would join her when I woke up.

I walked. I swam all night long and walked to the farmers place. It was almost dawn when I reached the farm. There was the farmer. And he motioned to me not to even enter his house, to go to the barn.

I met him in the barn. And I asked him if my mother was-- he said, no, he had not seen her. And furthermore, he said, when it gets dark, I'll allow you to stay in the barn for the day. And when it gets dark, you'd better leave or else I'll take you to the authorities, which meant they would kill me.

I pleaded with him to allow me to stay at least one more day so I could try to get some plan of what I had to do. But he wouldn't listen to it. He was shaking his head.

And then I said, you promised my mother that you would hide us here. And he just shrugged his shoulders. And before he left the barn, I noticed that he was wearing my father's gold pocket watch and chain. He left.

And I was crying to myself and feeling sorry for myself and didn't know what to do. Late in the afternoon, the wife of the farmer came in, a lovely lady. And she said, my child, I sympathize with you. But my husband means business.

And if you want to live, you better leave that evening. She gave me a slice of bread and an apple and left. And so when it got dark, I left the farm, the barn.

And this is actually when my odyssey starts. I was running from forest to forest. That area of Poland abounds with forests. And so logically, that's where I started looking for my mother.

I could not allow myself to think that I would never find my mother again. Had I allowed that thought, I think I would not have survived. I kept thinking that my mother was in the forest and that she was looking for me and I was looking for her and I would find her.

I spent two full years and three horrible winters running from forest to forest in search of my mother. I was hungry. And I was cold. And I was thirsty.

But the most important, I think, part of my living through the Holocaust was being all alone. Humans are not meant to be all alone. I started talking to myself because I was afraid I would forget a human language. Being alone was as painful as being hungry, being terrorized, being thirsty, and being terribly cold.

In the daytime, I would stay in a forest and dig a little grave, camouflage it, and stay there until it would get dark. Darkness was my only cover. In the dark, it got to the point where it was so bad that I started eating insects, worms, and the like. It's hard to imagine now, but somehow I persevered, day by day.

I had many, many close calls. But one of them is indelible in my brain, in my head. Because it involved other people as well. There were seven of us. We met at the edge of a forest.

Others that were in hiding as well?

Yes, yes, actually, there were five people, five single people, then there was a mother with a child strapped to her chest and I. There were seven of us altogether. And we tried to share information where to get food, where to hide, about other survivors.

And that was in broad daylight. And we were sitting in a circle outside of the forest. And all of a sudden, we were spotted by a group of children from a neighboring village.

Jews! They yelled with glee and ran back to the village. You see, there was a small monetary reward for reporting a Jew. We had to hide.

That forest didn't have much underbrush. And there was no place to hide. Sometimes forests have just trees and you can see very far ahead, but there's no place to hide.

And so we went into the fields. It was harvest time. And there were huge haystacks around. Here haystacks are small, round, and very densely packed with hay.

There, at that time, the haystacks were like long barns, narrow, and not as densely packed with hay. We all ran and hid in one haystack. Why all seven of us hid in one haystack, I cannot explain.

But when the villagers and the kids came searching for us, it wasn't very hard for them to zero in on that one haystack. I remember that I concentrated on breathing quietly and not sneezing. It seems when you're inside of hay there is so much dust and that makes you cough and sneeze. And I concentrated on not coughing and not sneezing. And that was very, very hard to do.

I heard screams. And I heard crying. The villagers came with pitchforks. And they made a game of it. They kept stabbing the pitchforks into the haystack, singing and joking among themselves.

By the time they tired of their play, everything became quiet. I was scratched and bleeding, but I was not hurt very

severely. I waited until I saw through the hay that it was completely dark. And I worked my way out of the haystack.

And to my horror, I saw six bodies lined up neatly, their clothes removed, shoes removed. And the lady who had the child, she was on her back and the baby was on her chest. I felt very sad. I did not know the names of all these people.

But I did know the name of the baby. When we first met, the baby was sucking its mother's thumb. I was fortunate. I had two carrots in my bag. And I took out one and gave it to the mother.

And she promptly put it in the baby's mouth. And the child was sucking on the carrot. And at that time, she told me his name is Buzio. And so I knew the baby's name. And when I looked at this horrible sight, the baby was on the mother's chest and the villagers put the carrot back in his mouth.

I wanted to bury these people. I didn't even know their name. But I didn't have anything to bury them with. I said a prayer, a Jewish prayer for the dead, which I knew from home. And I walked away. I walked all day, all night that night. And I was still in the same forest. And there was nowhere to hide.

When dawn came, I climbed up a tree and stayed there all day long. Good thing, too, as at that time there was some kind of a gathering of Ukrainians and Nazis. I don't know if they had a picnic or whatever. I just hoped that they would never look up. Because the tree that I climbed up and hid there did not cover me altogether.

But I was lucky. They did not look up. And they did not find me.

And so my odyssey continued. I ran from one forest to the other, staying in the daytime in my little graves which I camouflaged. And at night, searching for food.

Charlene, at one point you had an encounter with some partisans in the forest. Would you tell us about that?

Yes, one time I was lucky. And I ran into a group of Ukrainian partisans. They asked me what my nationality was.

And I was stupid and I told them I was Jewish. I should not have said that. But I did. I did not know how to lie.

And they looked at me and they said we do not accept Jews. They allowed me to stay that one day with them. It's very ironic because these partisans were fighting the Germans and they were hating the Germans just as we have. But they hated the Jews even more. In retrospect, later, I was told I was very lucky that they did not kill me.

That night I had to leave the partisans. And before I did, I appropriated a warm coat, a pair of boots, one was two sizes larger than the other, some food, and matches. You see, matches were very important to my survival. Rubbing two stones together in order to produce a fire was mostly not very successful. And so having matches for a while was very helpful.

I was very sad to leave the group. Because I felt I could contribute and I would not be alone. But they rejected me. And so my odyssey continued.

Charlene, our time is starting to get close to the end. And we can't even begin to do justice if we were here for the rest of the afternoon to hear about your ordeal in the forest for those two years. Tell us a little bit before we move to your liberation about how you were able to even, the matches aside, how you were able to stay clothed. How did you manage that in two years of really truly almost unimaginably brutal conditions?

Yes, well, the clothes, my original clothes deteriorated and disintegrated. But at one time, and that's a long story, so I'll just make it short, I ended up on a farm. And I was in the barn. And I hid in the straw, all the way on top.

And then all of a sudden, there was a hand and a face right looking at me. And I thought oh, my God. I was caught. And that would be the end of me.

But this was a young woman named Paranka. And she was my angel. She looked at me and put her finger to her mouth. In other words, I should not scream or not say anything.

She was the manager of that farm. And she nursed me back to health and gave me clothing and fed me for two weeks. I did not know her background. She never volunteered except gave me her name.

But after approximately two weeks, after I was still in that barn trying to heal my blistered feet, and she gave me clothes and food, all of a sudden, two guards or policemen came to the farm. And they asked for the farmer. The farmer was away.

And the farmer's wife came out and asked them what they wanted. And they said we want to see Paranka. Well, Paranka came out. And they wanted to see her papers. She showed them her papers. And the two of them shot her.

It turned out that somebody probably recognized her. And she was a Jewish young woman who had false papers and she worked on that farm. The farmer's wife became very upset.

And she said not my Paranka. She is not Jewish. What are you doing? And these two policemen said, if you don't shut up, we'll burn down your farm.

And that was the end of my getting better health wise and getting some food and clothing. I think she was my angel that gave me back my life again. And that's the way I survived. I don't think I would have survived if it were not for the help of Paranka.

And yet you did survive. And how did you manage to be found?

Well, I was going from forest to forest. And in the daytime, I would dig a little grave, camouflage it, and then at night look for food. At that time, I did not know what time of year, what year it was. All I knew is in the winter time it was terribly cold and it was snowing very heavily.

And in the summer, it was still damp and wet and no snow, but I never saw the sun. It was very, very dark. And somehow I survived.

I must have eaten something that did not agree with me at one time. Most of what I ate didn't agree with me. And I became very ill and was in my own filth and couldn't even lift my head to clean up after me.

But that was already 1944, spring. And at that time, the Soviet Union was pushing the Germans back. And the war was now turning in our favor. One time, a group, a battalion of Russian soldiers ended up pitching their tents for the night in the forest where I was dying.

And to their exquisite credit and my terrific luck, they looked around and tried to pitch tents in the area where I was dying in my little grave. They saw the camouflage on top. And they investigated. And, again, to their great credit, they took me out dying from that little grave and took me with them.

And what they did, they put me in what they called the field hospital, which was in the daytime we were in trucks. And at night, they pitched tents. And I was in the field hospital.

I don't remember any of that. And they dragged me-- well, they took me with them for about a month until they came to a city by the name of Luck, L-U-C-K. There they located an actual hospital.

And they left me there with a note. And I'm paraphrasing because I never saw the note, but it was pinned to my shirt. And it said this is a child of the forests. Treat her gently with great care.

And in that hospital, they nursed me back to health. And I was there about three or four weeks. And that's when I met the other survivor from my hometown and other survivors from the neighboring villages and towns.

When we were there, and when I met the other survivors, the older people-- I was one of the very few children-- the older people decided that it was not safe for us to stay there because there were still pogroms and the people in that area were still killing Jews, even though for us the war was over. And so the older survivors decided we must go, of all places, to Germany.

Why Germany? Because at that time, Germany was occupied by the four powers. It was the United States, France, Great Britain, and Russia. And so we made our way illegally to Germany.

It took a number of months because we didn't have any papers. We didn't have any passports. We didn't have any money. But somehow, we ended up in Germany.

There the United Nations Rehabilitation and Relief Agency built what they called DP camps, displaced persons camps for survivors. And this was my first return to humanity. I will never forget the time when I was given an OK to enter one of the displaced persons camps.

And I had to go through a disinfection. There was a lady who told me to disrobe. And she had a hose in her hand. And all of a sudden, white powder was covering me from top to bottom. The powder was extremely ill-smelling, and it made me sick to my stomach.

But the lady kept on using the hose. And when she decided, and it seemed to me it was two or three hours, that I had enough cover to disinfect me, she told me to go and take a shower. The shower was cold, but it felt so good to get rid of all the filth that I acquired in five years before.

And that's when I did get the most precious gifts I will ever receive in my life. I did get a toothbrush, toothpaste, a bar of soap, clean underwear, a dress four sizes or so larger than I needed, shoes, socks, a pillow, a blanket, and a towel. And that was my return to humanity.

I spent three years after the war waiting to join my relatives in the United States, even though I sent them a letter right after I ended up in the DP camps. Don't ask me what I ate yesterday, but I remembered the address of my grandmother in America, 231 Echo Place, Bronx 57, New York. I wrote to her and told her I survived and I would very much like to join the rest of the family in America.

They sent me an affidavit verifying the fact that I would not become a burden to the government and consequently to allow me to go and join my family. But even with these papers, I still had to wait three long years before I was allowed to join my family in the United States.

Before we close, and we're going to come back to Charlene to close our program in just a couple minutes, one question I want to ask you before we close, Charlene, and that is I everybody will want to know this, when did you and what did you find out about your mother or your sister?

Well, I found out when I found myself in Luck, and after I regained reasonable health, the other survivor-- there were only two survivors out of 5,000 Jews in my hometown-- I met the other survivor who was quite older than I. And actually, she used to be a student of my father's at one time. We went back to our hometown in hopes that we would find other survivors and some of our families.

The reception we received in Horochow, in our hometown, was to say the least, very cold. They asked us what do you want. There are no Jews left here. We don't want you here, just like that. And it was a very cold reception and very disappointing.

We did not find any survivors there. And I was told that my sister was denounced by the farmer who took her in. I'm not sure. But she was caught and paraded in the nude, naked, on a beautiful ulica Mickiewicza. And then she was murdered. No one knows anything about my mother.

I don't know how to say it. But I felt almost betrayed by our former friends and neighbors who treated us so cold. I don't know other expressions at this point. But it was very disappointing.

I still have a house in my town of Horochow. But of course, I'll never reclaim it. And I think the reason that our neighbors and former friends were so unfriendly was greed. They felt that we came to claim our possessions and our houses. And they did not want to part with them. And maybe that's why they were so unfriendly.

Thank you, Charlene. I'd like to thank all of you for being here with us today. We hope that you'll come back to another First Person program. I want to remind you that we will have First Person programs every Wednesday until the 25th of August and on Tuesdays until the end of July.

When we finish in just a couple of moments, Charlene will step down and she will go up to sign copies of Echoes of Memory. And if any of you would like to have a chat with her, please feel free to do that. We haven't had a chance to have a question and answer period today. So if you want to do that or just meet her, you'll have the opportunity to do that.

Before I turn over the closing to Charlene, our next program will be next Tuesday, which is May 18. And our First Person will be Mr. Gerald Liebenau, who is from Berlin, Germany. Five years after the Nazis took control of Germany, Mr. Liebenau's family fled to England and then to the United States. After graduating from high school here, Mr. Liebenau joined the US Army and would be sent to Europe during the closing year of World War II.

Please remember that can access First Person podcasts on the museum's website as well as through iTunes. It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. And so with that, I'd like to turn it over to Charlene to close today's program.

Well, my plea to you, dear friends, together we must continue to fight what I call the four evil I's, indifference, injustice, intolerance, and ignorance. These evils are as pertinent today as they were 65 years ago. In the '90s, we had Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda. Now we have Darfur, Sudan, the Congo, and many other places. Unfortunately, genocide is still with us. And anti-Semitism is on the rise.

I would like to appeal, especially to our young people, you are our dearest possession, our dearest treasure. You hold the future in 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 humankind.

And now I do want to end with telling you a few words about this museum and what it means to me. I am in awe of this institution. It is a memorial to 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. Thank you for being such a good audience.

[APPLAUSE]