

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 12th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Charlene Schiff, whom we shall meet shortly. This 2011 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.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust, who share with us their firsthand experiences during the Holocaust. Each guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. With few exceptions, we will have a First Person program each Tuesday and Wednesday through July and then on Wednesdays only in August.

The museum's website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests. Excerpts from our first person programs are available as podcasts on the museum's website. They are also available through iTunes. A podcast featuring Charlene Schiff is currently available on the museum's website.

Charlene will share her first-person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If we have some remaining time, we may have an opportunity for you to ask Charlene some questions. We ask that you stay in your seats throughout our one-hour program. That way we minimize any disruptions for Charlene as she speaks. If you have a cell phone or a similar device, we ask that you turn it off at this time. I'd like to let those of you who may have passes to the permanent exhibition today know that they are good for the time printed on your ticket or for any time after that today.

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.

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, 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 Horochów. The arrow on this map of Poland points to the location of Horochów.

Charlene's father was a professor of philosophy at the University of Lvov. Here we see a contemporary postcard of the University of Lvov. This is a picture of the market square in Horochów. Note the wooden synagogue in the background. And we probably will hear a little bit more about that later from Charlene.

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 set up a ghetto in Horochów. 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 gun fire rang out from the ghetto. For several days, Charlene and her mother stayed in the water. Charlene then lost her mother and, unable to find her, she spent 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, seen in this photograph. And here we close our slide presentation with a contemporary photograph of Charlene standing in front of the steps to her elementary school in Horochów.

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

Ed, who retired as a colonel was appointed an honorary brigadier general and served as a military aide to two recent former Virginia Governors, Tim Kaine and Mark Warner. For several years Charlene and Ed visited soldiers at Walter Reed hospital on a monthly basis. I'm sorry to say that Ed passed away in 2008.

Charlene lives in Northern Virginia. She and Ed had one son, Steven, and two grandsons, Perry and Morgan, now ages 19 and 17, both of whom, as Charlene likes to note, are very sports-minded. She has been speaking about her Holocaust experience since 1985, speaking frequently to schools and universities. Many notable speaking experiences that I think she's very proud of, including a week-long visit to Alaska and to some pretty remote towns. And at one high school that had 504 students, 500 showed up to hear her speak.

She spoke at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, where her grandson Perry is a student. And just last week, she was the keynote speaker at a Yom HaShoah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day event, at the Technical Institute of Florida in Melbourne, Florida. She was told to expect an audience of perhaps 40, and between 400 and 500 showed up.

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 in January of 2010. And just a few weeks ago, for the Holocaust Remembrance Day celebration in Alexandria, Virginia, Charlene was the keynote speaker. And Charlene has been present for all 24 years of that event in Alexandria.

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 class for survivors. After today's program, Charlene will be available to sign copies of *Echoes of Memory*, which is also available in the museum's bookstore.

Today Charlene is accompanied by close friends, Ruth Ungerleider, as well as Ania and Marcel Drimer who are here with us in the front row next to Charlene. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Charlene Schiff.

[APPLAUSE]

Charlene, welcome and thank you so much for your willingness to be our First Person today. We're glad to have you. And we have so much to cover in a one-hour period, so let's start. And let's begin, Charlene, with you telling us about your early life, living in a small town in Poland, your first 10 years before Germany invaded Poland. Tell us a little bit about you, your family, and your community in those years before war began.

Well, first of all, I want to welcome everyone. Thank you for coming in on this very, very warm day. I'll try to be concise. And if we have time after my remarks, I would welcome questions from the audience. And I'll try to answer to the best of my knowledge. Thank you all for coming, and welcome.

My life, my first 10 years-- nine years, actually-- of my life in a small town in Eastern Poland, in a little town named Horochów, my time there was idyllic. I was a young girl, who did all the things that young children do. I was actually a tomboy. I liked to climb trees, watch birds, and do all the things that young children do.

My family, my immediate family, consisted of four, my wonderful parents-- my father was a professor of philosophy at the University of Lvov, which was only about 30 or 40 miles from Horochów. My mother was also a teacher, but she stayed home to raise her two young daughters. I had one older sister, five years older than I. And she was actually a musical prodigy.

She played the piano and the violin exquisitely. I couldn't hold a candle to her. And when my parents offered lessons, music lessons to me, I refused to take them because I knew I would never live up to the reputation that my sister had.

Charlene, you described to me that was a time of harmony and cooperation in the community. Do you recall antisemitism from that time?

Well, I'm often asked if I do remember any antisemitism at that time. And I must say, honestly, that I don't remember any antisemitism in our town of Horochów. And the reason, I think, for it-- I mean for living in harmony and in peace with our neighbors was the fact that the entire community worked together towards the betterment of humankind in our town.

Just to give you an example, my mother and several of her friends organized summer camps for poor children. Now, there were summer camps for Jewish children and summer camps for Christian children. They had to be separate because the Jewish children required dietary laws that were a little bit more stringent. For instance, dairy products and meat products should not be mixed together. And that's why these camps were separate. But other than that, they were entirely the same.

And so the entire community worked together. We lived in peace and harmony. And we tried to help the entire community to have a better life. And this is why. It was rather unusual that, in a small town like mine, Horochów, that there-- I did not know of any antisemitism. Perhaps there was some, but I did not experience it before the war.

Charlene, that period, that does sound like a really wonderful and peaceful time.

Yes.

Of course, all of that changed suddenly when Germany and then Russia attacked Poland. And your town first fell under the control of the Soviets.

Yes.

What can you tell us about your family's life when your town was occupied by the Russians?

Well, I'm sure there were many changes. And the Soviets came in with a lot of fanfare but little bloodshed. And at that time, whatever changes took place in our town, the changes were not zeroed in on one group of people, the Jews. It was-- the changes were for all the people in town. And that's perhaps why I don't remember much that was different.

I know the schools were open, and my father still had his position at the university.

So no change for him professionally?

Well, I don't know. Maybe there was a different direction in his teaching. But I did not think that there was. And the only thing I remember as a child is that the language became Russian instead of Polish. But again, in our area, the area that I come from, the regime for this part of Europe changed so often that most people were either bi or trilingual out of necessity. And consequently, changing the official language from Polish to Russian was not really a big thing.

And this is the only thing I remember as a child. But this actually did change in 1942. Well, 1941-- what am I saying? You see, there's senile moments.

[LAUGHTER]

In 1941, the Germans broke the agreement with the Soviet Union and started invading the eastern part of Poland, which they had an agreement with the Soviet Union not to, I guess, touch. In the summer of 1941, the Germans started pursuing their evil goals by attacking all Eastern Poland. Our little town, Horochów, was actually occupied very, very shortly after they started their push for their evil goals.

Once our town was occupied by the Germans, the life of the Jews changed completely. It was very evident

from the very beginning that our lives were actually very, very precarious and that the Germans had a goal to get rid of all the Jews in Europe.

The way they started, they would come in to a town like ours, Horochów. And the first thing they did, they rounded up all the Jewish leaders. Now, the Germans didn't know who the leaders were. So consequently, they were helped by the local, our neighbors and friends with whom we lived in harmony until the war started. They came up with a list of 300 leaders in our little town of Horochów, my father among them.

I will never forget the day when my family, my immediate family, was torn apart by the fact that they took my father away. They didn't-- they surrounded the house, and that was Germans and Ukrainians. They came into the house. We were still in our own home, in our own house. And they grabbed my father.

My father was a very formal man. And he was in his shirtsleeves. And he asked could he go into the next room in order to put on a suit jacket. They wouldn't allow him to do that. They wouldn't allow him to say goodbye to my mother, my sister, and me. And they just dragged him out of the house. That was the last time I saw my father.

Charlene, you told us that the people that you had lived with in such harmony and cooperation, then-- you told me that they then pretty much turned on their neighbors. And that's where the list came from. Tell us a little bit more about that.

Well, it's very sad and very-- I mean, to me it's something that I can never explain and I can never try to understand, how people with whom you live in peace and harmony and with whom you are friendly and try to help one another, how they can turn to be your enemy overnight. It seems-- I found out only a few years ago that all the Polish intelligentsia, the doctors, the professors, the lawyers, were involuntarily evacuated to Central Poland. So they were not there to help us.

But the Ukrainians, I'm very sorry to say, were really-- who were with us 100% before the war, they were our friends, they were our neighbors. And overnight, they turned to be our enemy. They supplied the Germans with the list of the leaders, the Jewish leaders.

Then, there is one other small fact. But it just goes to show how things turned in our town. My father had a very wonderful, complete-- well, I don't know how complete. But he had a very fine library. He collected rare books and first editions. And everyone in the neighborhood, everyone in the area, knew that his library was one of the finest.

Now, a few days after the Germans entered our town, a group of Germans drove up with a covered truck, came into our house, addressed my mother as "Gnadige Frau," meaning giving her the honor of a lady, and asked where my father's library was. She showed them. They took all the books, put them in a truck, and drove off. They gave my mother a receipt. I wish I had it now, but I don't.

Then everything that you could think of that is horrible started happening to the Jews. After they took the leaders away, after they took the books from my father's library away, they started burning all-- they didn't start, they finished-- burning all the synagogues, our Torahs, our prayer books. They made us wear a yellow Star of David on the front and back of our clothing. And everyone 14 years or older had to report to slave labor outside the ghetto.

The ghetto was formed very fast. And before we were marched into the ghetto, we were ordered to take with us what we could carry. We could take with us to the ghetto only what we could carry with us. And we had to meet in the market square, and then we were assigned a space in the ghetto.

The ghetto was completely enclosed by wooden fences that were finished off with barbed wire. There were two gates guarded 24/7, and one needed a permit, a written permit, to enter or exit the ghetto.

Charlene, before you continue to tell us about what life was like in the ghetto, did you know what happened to your father after they took him away?

At that time, we did not. I did not find out until the end of the war. And I'll come to that. Do you want me to tell?

No, no. Come to that when you're ready to do that.

Well, I also want to go back to the synagogue that was shown here on the--

The wooden synagogue.

Yes. In Poland, there were 40-plus wooden synagogues. They were famous because they were built completely out of wood. Even the nails were wooden. And I don't know why my small town of Horochów was honored with one of the wooden synagogues. I don't know when it was built. But that photograph that you saw here was actually taken in the early 1920s. And I'm just going to make it short. In the 1920s, early in 1920s, a wonderful visionary here in America decided to commission a good photographer. And he sent him to Poland in order to take photographs of all the wooden synagogues.

I don't know if he realized what the political situation would be in a few years. But thanks to him, there is now a book with all the photographs of all the wooden synagogues that disappeared during the German regime. There are a few that did survive, and the Germans used them as stables or warehouses. And it was actually desecrated, and it was not considered a Holy place anymore. But this is the way I obtained this photograph. And I'm very grateful.

Again, now coming back to our ghetto lives, it was from bad to worse. I remember, we were assigned to a house. And I mean, there were three other families, with my mother, sister, and me, in one room. I can't remember exactly if it was a two or three-story house. But I remember distinctly that there were approximately 100 people in that house. We had to use only one very primitive kitchen and a very primitive bathroom for 100 people. You can just imagine how difficult that was.

Every day the Germans kept requesting all our material possessions. First they asked for all the gold, silver, nickel, paintings, Persian rugs, furs, bicycles, radios. Anything of value we had to give up to the Germans. They formed a Judenrat, a group of Jewish men who had to answer directly to the Germans on our behalf. They had to satisfy the Germans' whims and all their orders. And this is the way our life in the ghetto started.

And you mentioned-- I was going to ask you to tell us about you were forced-- your mother was forced to do slave labor and your sister as well. Tell us about that.

Well, my mother, who was a teacher by profession too, was actually ordered to dig ditches and to fix roads outside the ghetto. My sister was very, very fortunate. She was ordered, with other older girls, to join what they called a knitting factory. The knitting factory was in an old warehouse outside the ghetto. Most of the work was done outside the ghetto. And there they would knit articles of clothing for the German soldiers on the front.

Now, I did not mention, and it's very important to me and I think to you too. When I first started speaking, in 1985, before this museum was even in anyone's planning, people would ask me, how come the Jews went like sheep to slaughter? It was like a knife into my heart. And yet, I could not answer because I did not know what was going on. But at that time, I told them that, even in my little ghetto of Horochów, where there were approximately 5,000 Jewish people, there was resistance.

The resistance consisted, one, my mother and several other women organized a clandestine school, a secret school for children too young to work. Somehow they bartered with money or jewelry. They found some books, pencils, paper, crayons. And this school was existing late at night, when everyone was coming home tired and hungry from work.

We looked forward to these wonderful gatherings that took our minds off the terrible hunger we felt all the time. And that was a wonderful, wonderful thing. And I think that organizing this clandestine school is part of resistance against the Germans.

And Charlene, you also engaged in your own clandestine activity.

Yes. While the Soviet-- I mean, while the ghetto was being organized, there was an awful lot of going and coming, and chaos ensued. And so at that time, 20 young kids, all of us under age to be able to work, decided to dig what we euphemistically called a tunnel. It was actually a hole that went from the ghetto, outside. We found a dilapidated kiosk outside that didn't have a roof anymore. But it still had the rounded walls, and there was our exit or our, actually, place where we would come out from the ghetto.

And then, when we would be able to, hopefully, find some food for our families, we would go back into the kiosk and work our way back to the ghetto. This way we did not need a written permit, which was very difficult to obtain.