

Good afternoon and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. Thank you for joining us. We are in our 13th year of the First Person program. Our first person today is Mr. Isak Danon, whom we shall meet shortly. This 2012 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring First Person.

First Person is a series of 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. Our program will continue weekly through mid-August. The museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

Isak Danon will share his first-person account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Isak a few questions at the end of the program. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Isak is one individual's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction. Isak Danon was born in 1929 in Yugoslavia. The arrow on this map of Europe points to Yugoslavia. On this map of Yugoslavia, the arrow points to the approximate location of Split, Isak's hometown. Isak's father owned a small dry goods store. Isak and his three sisters attended the local school. This photograph was taken in Split in 1939 at a Jewish club's Hanukkah party. Isak was nine years old. And as you can see, he's at the lower left. Also pictured in this photograph are Isak's three sisters, his mother, and father.

Shortly after the war came to Yugoslavia in early 1941, Italian forces took over parts of the country. Many Jews fled from more hostile parts of Europe to Split and surrounding areas for refuge, causing the town's Jewish population to swell from about 200 to nearly 7,000. In 1943, after the fall of Mussolini, Isak and his father were forced to flee Split as German troops advanced. And they traveled with partisans through the mountains. After several months, Isak and his father were reunited in Italy with his mother and two of his sisters, who had gone into hiding.

In 1944, Isak and his family were invited by the United States government to be part of a group of 1,000 refugees to come to the United States. Isak and his family spent the next 1 and 1/2 years in a refugee camp at Fort Ontario Army Base in Oswego, New York. This photograph shows newly-arrived refugees waiting to register at Fort Ontario.

Isak and his family settled in Philadelphia after the war. This photograph was taken in October 1946, after Isak's family left Fort Ontario. In this portrait are Isak, his two sisters, mother, father, and an aunt. Isak's oldest sister did not come to the US with the family, but stayed in Belgrade. One of Isak's sisters cut out a photograph of the eldest sister and put her picture into the family portrait in the upper left-- and I think you'll be able to notice that-- because they could not bear to not have her in the photo with them.

After the war, Isak and his family, as I mentioned, moved to Philadelphia. After working to support his family while going to night school to finish high school, then to earn his accounting degree from Temple University, Isak was drafted into the United States Army during the Korean War. He would later have a 30-year career as an auditor with the US Department of the Interior.

Isak's first wife, with whom he had two daughters, passed away in 1997. He remarried in 2004. He and his wife, Leonor, have a son, Joshua, who is six. Isak's daughter, Zsuzsanna, lives in the Washington, DC area. And his other daughter, Alisa, lives in New Jersey. Isak has a sister in Philadelphia and another in Baltimore. And he is close to both sisters. Isak's wife, Leonor, is with us today.

Isak's volunteer work with the museum has been with the archives, where he has translated and summarized personal accounts of the Holocaust in a variety of languages, including Serbian, Croatian, Italian, Ladino, and French. And he also speaks Spanish fluently, and of course, English. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Isak Danon.

[APPLAUSE]

Isak, thank you so much for joining us today and for your willingness to be our first person. And we have so much to cover, not much time. So we'll get started. You were born, as we noted earlier, in the city of Split in Yugoslavia. And the war didn't really begin to affect you in a big way until 1941. But let's start first with you telling us about your childhood, your family, your community in those years leading up to the war.

OK. Well, as you said, my father and mother, they had a store, a textile store. And my sisters and I, we went to school. I was the second child. I had a sister older than me, two years older, and two younger sisters. I remember, I loved the school, was lots of fun for me. I was a good student. And the teachers liked me. I know that. It was easy for me.

This is a little trick-- my older sister, she was one year ahead of me. And when she would study her lessons, she would go around our house and repeating it. And by the time she learned, the whole family already had the answers. So when it was my turn the following year, the teacher would present the subject, was no problem. I knew the answers before she even asked the questions. And the teacher says, boy, he's so smart, a genius. And I was a little squirt, as you could see in that picture.

So anyway, the teachers liked me. And the other students liked me also, I think, because sometimes, I would let them copy my lessons. So yeah, I'm just suspecting that. Anyway, I had a lot of friends, both at school and in the neighborhood. And we enjoyed doing things like kids do. In the schools, we were separated.

Girls went to one school, boys went to another school. We had same subjects, like kids over here would have-- reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history. And one difference-- We had the religion. That was the main subject in schools. And everybody had to study religion, their own religion.

The area where I lived, it was predominantly Catholic. So the priest would come to the school and he would conduct a class. We, the non-Catholics, we were excused for that hour. Go out, play, do something, or just go on the fence and look at the girls' school and tease them for fun. Yeah. But we had to make up religion some other way. So we would have-- once a week, we would meet near our synagogue. And all the Jewish children would get their religious instruction.

I used to enjoy going to the beach. Split, as you saw, was right on the beach. They had beautiful beaches. And in spring and summer, that was the best recreation, lots of tourists coming to Split. And what we used to like to do, also, was go to our store near to closing time. And then our parents would take us around for a walk, where everybody walked up and down, and there were outdoor restaurants, and cafes, and music, and dancing. And they would buy us ice cream. That was the biggie. So anyway, my youth was, as I said, very enjoyable experience as far as I can remember.

Isak, you told me that-- one, you told me that school was pretty serious at school. It wasn't a fun place. But you also said that students were pretty politically and socially conscious.

Oh, yeah. Europe was a tough place to live. You grew up-- you were a child, but you were expected to be a grown-up. We knew everything that was going on in the world around us because our parents would always talk about it. And we were there. So when they were worried about something, we knew about it. And we were worried too.

And you were aware of what was happening in Spain, for example.

Absolutely, yeah. Our community, the Jewish community, like you said, was small-- about 200 people. But we were well-organized. We had our synagogue, of course. We had social club, youth club. And we would have parties, and discussions, and lectures, and even movies. And we'd go out and do field trips. And we knew what was going on politically, and socially, and everything. I was going to say that when I was growing up, I didn't feel any antisemitism. But then what did I know? I was a kid, right? But I learned later that it was under the surface. You could see it there.

It didn't affect you as far as you knew on a daily basis.

It didn't affect me because we were children playing.

In September 1939, of course, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, beginning World War II. But it really didn't come to Split until 1941. Tell us what you can about what life was like, if any changes occurred during that time between the war beginning in September '39 and 1941, when you actually-- when war came to your community.

Well, Poland, as you said, was attacked in 1939. But Poland wasn't the first country that fell under the German influence. You had, like you mentioned, Spain. And you had Austria was taken over and then Czechoslovakia. And Hitler came to power in 1935. Before that, he wrote a book, My Battle or Mein Kampf. And he outlined exactly what he was going to do when he takes power and how he was going to do things. And he was planning on conquering Europe first and then the rest of the world. And he didn't like Jews too much. So he had bad plans for us.

And you were aware of that.

Absolutely. And like when he attacked Poland, that was according to script. We knew. People read his book or talked about it. And the community was petrified and really frozen. They didn't know what to do. You can't run away because next country, wherever you run, he's going to come. And you couldn't come to United States because-- I was going to say our borders were sealed-- but US borders were sealed. You couldn't go. Some people managed to go to Argentina. But then again, you had to have the means for coming here.

So they didn't do much. I mean, they just lived with trepidation. The only little thing that I can think of was they had a feeling-- or from experience, from knowing what was happening in other places-- they knew that if you had a trade, in case something happens, you can earn your livelihood in doing that trade. So the community set up instructions. I guess they set up a carpenter shop, and electrical shop, and whatever it was-- mechanic shop.

For the purpose of learning these trades.

For the purpose of teaching us, teaching us, teaching the grown-up men these trades. And women were learning how to sew clothes and a few other jobs, like hairstyling or whatever.

At that time, Isak, what did you and what did the community know about Mussolini in Italy?

We knew a lot about everybody. First of all, Mussolini, that was real fascism. And he didn't succeed in some places. But he-- not conquered, but he won his-- what, he was not a president, he was a leader, Duce, they called him-- Italy in 1927. And he ran a country with an iron hand. And then he joined with Hitler and Tojo in Japan. And they formed what they called the Axis, tripartite agreement. And they forced all the countries around them to join them, or they would be invaded like Poland and Spain. So we knew all about that I mean, as kids, we knew it.

At that time-- so you've got Mussolini, a fascist, in Italy, which is close by, and Hitler, of course. What about fascists in Split, in your own city? Were there fascists there?

Well, there might have been some in the underground. But they didn't come up on the surface because we had a dictatorship of our own. And they wouldn't have tolerated that. But Germany or Austria and Italy, they sent money to agitate a little bit. There were always some kind of upheavals, rebellions, and stuff. But they were put down with force by the government.

So in April of 1941, the Italians under Mussolini attacked Split while Germany attacked Belgrade and other parts of Yugoslavia. Tell us about the attack on Split by the Italians. And then they occupied Split. What that was like for you, and your family, and your community to now be occupied by the Italians?

Well, the way this started, I remember waking up in the morning Sunday about 6:00, 6:30 to the sound of explosions. And there was quite a few explosions, boom boom. And we didn't know what it was. Everybody ran to the windows. And some people ran to the street, see what it is. We had some quarries, stone quarries in our neighborhood, maybe about five, six blocks away. And we thought, maybe they were at work or that. But Sunday morning, who is doing that?

Wasn't.

So finally, some people from the windows yelled, they're bombing Belgrade, the Germans are bombing Belgrade. And then we saw planes in the sky, Italian planes. And they dropped some bombs. And that was it, as far as the Italians were concerned, for a little while-- a few days or a week. Then after a while, we started seeing military police in full gear with machine guns swung around their shoulders.

And then we started seeing the Italian soldiers in our neighborhood with the tanks and their trucks and setting up camps, tents, all that. And then started coming out posters how-- directing us that this is a new rule, new commands, we will listen to what they tell us. And then every day, new posters, saying, under the king and the emperor, Vittorio Emanuele, this is the order for the day. And all the people who have arms in their houses-- like guns, pistols, stuff like that-- have to bring it to the certain point immediately. Anybody caught with arms will be shot on sight.

The next thing came, everybody had to report. Of course, the Jews had special directives for them. We all had to report to the-- what is it-- city hall, or police headquarters, or something and tell them where we lived, how many in our families. And then we all had to get ID cards, from the youngest to the oldest.

Then not only for the Jews, but for the whole community, and immediately, like two weeks after the Italians took over, everything disappeared from the shelves in the grocery stores. In other stores, there was no food, no-- just nothing. So the poster says, when you get your IDs, you will earn the right to buy bread. And we had 15 ounces-- not 15 ounce-- 15-

Kilos?

--not kilograms, milligrams or whatever it is, the measurement.

A small amount of bread.

Small amount-- this much bread per day. You had to register where you want to go. And they gave you coupons. And they cut coupons as you buy. Well, for six of us in the family, we got a little bit less than a pound of bread a day. And don't forget, there was nothing else. Bread was it.

The people from the country, they used to bring vegetables and all that. They didn't want to sell it to you. They would bring some stuff, but they said, why would I take your paper money? That's not worth anything. What have you got to trade? So you had to do bartering. Yeah. And we had this store. So they would bring some chicken, dozen of eggs, maybe fruit. And OK, they need material for a dress. I have this chicken. How much material can I get for that? And that was the life.

Kind of how you went on.

Yeah, that's it. Yeah, continued the life. What happened? There was worse thing than that. First, for the Jews, the kids were not allowed to attend school. We were all kicked out. That was it. Then doctors, lawyers, the professional people were not allowed to practice their trade. All the Jewish civil employees, the government workers, as we call them here, they lost their jobs.

We were not allowed to go to the public places like city parks, even the beaches, and movies, theater-- that was all off limits to us. Even some streets, the main thoroughfares we were not allowed. We had to go back in roads. And we had a store in the center of the city. And my parents had to walk around to get to the store. And there was the restrictions we had.

But still, we continued to live. We managed, made ends meet. And comparatively speaking-- we knew what had happened to the Jews of Germany, like the Kristallnacht, where one period for three days and three nights, the hooligans, I guess, of the Nazi Party, with the active assistance from the police and the army, they went and started breaking into the stores, Jewish stores, Jewish establishments of any kind, stealing what they could, destroying what

they couldn't, setting fire to the rest of it. In that three day, over 300 synagogues were burned. Maybe 4,000 people got killed. And who knows how many were imprisoned? And a lot of them were beaten up, I mean, in tens of thousands. So Italians, they put restrictions on us, but nothing like the Germans and the Croatians.

Were doing elsewhere. But what about-- tell us about the Black Shirts. Who were the Black Shirts.

Black Shirts are the Italian fascists.

Italian fascists.

Yeah. When the Italians took over, we found out how many local fascists there were that were into the underground. They all put black shirts. And they were big there. If you were-- let's say you were Jewish and you were a head of a bank, you lost that job, and one of these hooligans got that job. Sometimes, they kept the Jewish guy to--

To do the actual work.

Yeah, to get the work done. But anyway, that's how it worked. They got all the civil service jobs. And they were marching all the time. And other kids were going to school. But the classes were conducted in Italian. And the kids, they welcomed that. They learned the language just like that as a child. That's how I learned from the other kids that would go to school and talk Italian.

Isak, things became far worse, though, for Jews in 1942. Tell us what happened.

Well, I was 13 years old then. And just one week, let's say in June 20-something, was my bar mitzvah. Bar mitzvah is when a Jewish boy reaches the age of 13. That's considered religious maturity. So I went to the synagogue. And I did whatever every 13-year-old is expected to do. I conducted the service and all that.

And as part of my ceremony, I gave a speech. And I made a commitment that I was going to be more observant. And I was going to come regularly to the service, and on time, and all that. So in the following week, I'm coming on time and even early with my sister, one of my sisters. And it was too early.

So we went to our father's store and tried to get him to close the store and come with us. And he was going to do that. But a last-minute customer was there. And I need this, and I like that. And so he was detained. So by the time he closed the store, was getting late already. So we start rushing to the synagogue, which was right off the main square of the city to the side street.

And as we're approaching this main square, we see people there, and hustle, and bustle. And we see soldiers with their rifles. And I see, they're beating up people. And what's going on? We didn't know what it was. But my father recognized a few people that were being hit, and thrown on the floor, and kicked, and all that. He recognized these people.

So he grabbed my hand and my sister's hand, said, come on this way. And we ran away from the scene and went all around. And we went home. And our father explained to us what it was. He says, these were Jewish people. It was near synagogue. So we went home all full of trepidation. What's going on?

And one of the younger rabbis lived about a block away from us. So we went near his house. He wasn't home yet. So we waited outside. About an hour later, we see him coming. He has a hanky like this to his face. And he's sort of limping a little bit. And when he came, he told us what happened.

The service had just started, when in walked in about four or five Black Shirts-- that's the Fascist Party members in the black shirts and military uniform. And they went to the rabbi and said, the service is over. Close up. What are you going to do? You do what the man with the rifle tells you. So they stopped and says, everybody out. And as people were coming out, these-- they had a lot of soldiers. So they formed a gauntlet like this as people were coming. They were hitting them.

As they're coming out of the synagogue.

Yes, coming out of the synagogue. They were hitting them with the butts of their rifles or kicking them. And as they were coming to the square, they were running after them, hitting them some more. Only one guy, an older fellow, 89 years old with a big beard, they let him go by there, yell, [ITALIAN], which means, let him go. And after that, we went home. This is what the rabbi told us.

And we went home. And we didn't know what was going on because he didn't stay to argue with him. He was sent home. Then next morning, bright and early, like 5:00, 5:30, my sister wakes me up. Let's go see what happened. So we walked. It's a pretty good distance to the synagogue. We come there, near there. And we see it's a yellow tape and two what they call Carabinieri-- that's military police-- they were marching up and down. We couldn't go in.

But we went toward our store. And we saw our uncle's store, who sold perfumes-- that's called perfumery, I guess. And there was-- the window was smashed. Inside, you see all destruction. All the shelving was just broken up, nothing left. We walked toward our store. Our store, like we said before, was a small store, didn't even have a window to it. It was some heavy wooden doors. So you see where something was hitting the door. And they couldn't break in. And there's the sign. It said my father's name. That was sort of smashed. And we went to see other Jewish stores nearby. They were all totally destroyed. And I assume people stole whatever they could, the rest destroyed.

And after that, we didn't have a synagogue anymore. We didn't have a center. So when the holidays came, we would meet in our different apartments. Our house was one of them. People would come and they would just do the prayers or whatever. And that was the end.

And they also tightened up. My parents couldn't sell certain stuff in the store unless you had the coupons. Everything-- you want to buy a pair of pants? You had to have enough coupons. If you didn't have them, we weren't allowed to sell.

And secret police in civilian clothes would come and said, you were selling clothes without coupons. No, we weren't. Yes, you were. You're lying. And they want to take you to prison. And then they would say, this is nice stuff for a suit. OK. Cut me enough cloth for a suit. And they would take that and go away. This was their way of doing business. So that was our life there.

And that continued until sometime in 1943, when Mussolini was killed. And the Italian occupiers left Split at that point. And Yugoslav partisans then took control of Split at that time. And then Germany and the Croats attacked your part of Yugoslavia. And that triggered your family's decision. At some point, we have to leave. Tell us about that time.

OK. While the Italians were there, we heard about partisans. Lots of young people had gone to the mountains to fight against the occupation. And my sister, I learned later, she joined. But they told her to stay in the city. She wasn't called to come to the mountains. She was told to stay in the city and organize the young people.

But you didn't know that.

No, we didn't know. That was a secret she kept from all of us. Anyway, so we knew-- well, when the partisans took over, they were a ragtag army. I mean, they didn't have any organization. They didn't have any weapons to fight the Germans. This is a big city, 50-some thousand people. They couldn't occupy and run it. You got to bring food to the people. You got to do all that.

And I knew, we all knew that partisans would have to give up the city. And we knew what would await us when the Germans or the Croats, their associates-- when they come because we knew what had happened before in other places. So we said, we got to leave. And we packed, my father and I. Usually, when the Germans or the Croats would take over an area, they would right away against the Jews.

But first, they would take all the men. And I was 13 years old. I was a man, as far as the war was concerned. So my father and I, we said, let's get ready to run away if they come. And we packed our backpack with extra sweater, and a couple of socks, and some crackers, and food to last us. And we even practiced jumping or sliding down from the

second-story window in the back. Because if the Germans or other army comes in front with the trucks, like they normally do, we would run to the back and slide.

Jump out two floors.

Yeah. And we practiced that. We had it down pat. Well, yeah, within two, two and a half weeks, one Sunday night, about 2 o'clock, there was knocking at the door, banging, Mr. Danon, Mr. Danon-- that wasn't me. My father was Mr. Danon. I was just a young kid there. So they were calling him some neighbors. He goes, open the door, what is it? The Germans are coming. The Germans are coming.

So he says-- he woke me up. And we were all awake by that time. So I put on my clothes, my backpack. We didn't have to jump in the back because there was nobody there yet. And we said goodbye to my mother and two sisters. And my parents, they divided whatever they had-- the money and stuff-- so you could survive.

And we started toward the mountains. Split was on the waterfront. But in the back, maybe 15-20 miles back were high mountains-- I mean, rugged mountains. There was no trees or anything, just rugged mountains. So we started marching toward there. You want me to tell you about being there?

Yes, please.

OK. So we marched the day. And German airplanes--

And just the two of you at that point?

Just the two of us, yeah. My mother and two sisters stayed back. My older sister, the minute that Mussolini fell, she went to the mountains.

With the partisans?

With the partisans, yeah. But she was part of a unit at that time. She was 16. So that's the time when boys and girls went to fight. Anyway, so we started marching. The German Stuka planes were coming down. And they would go mm and strafe there. Anyway, that means machine guns like this. And whatever moves, you would get hit. So as soon as we would see them coming behind the hill, something, you throw yourself with the gutter-- in the gutter and you don't move. Well, that was a novel thing for us. I thought it was exciting.

As a 13-year-old does.

Yeah. Anyway, so we continued. And then the planes disappeared for a while. And we spent the first night marching partially. Then we went to the side and slept there. And next morning, we continued marching. And we saw other people the same way as we were. They were coming from different parts of the city and different place. So there was a group of us. And we marched like that for maybe two or three days.

And then we finally got to the mountains. And we met the partisans-- or rather, they met us because they weren't there stationary. They were moving. And they approached us. OK, who are you guys? They had to make sure that we were not German spies. And so after a while, we joined them. And my father and I were in the same unit.

So you're actually part of the partisans now?

Part of the partisans, yeah, when they accepted us. And I'll tell you, the partisans-- again, there wasn't a unit of 40 men and you start in March. It was just a group of people. And we would hide in the mountains until nighttime. Then at that time, we would either move on to the next location.

And for the next maybe four-five months, we were sleeping during the day hiding and moving someplace until when-- any point during the week or so, we would be told we were going to attack a certain place. And then they wake you up

before the night starts and get ready secretly. And then you go to one area, whoever has a gun. Not everybody had a gun because they got some guns from the Italian Army, but not enough.

Now, there was a lot of people. So anyway, so we would go and attack that point. And there would be a lot of shooting. And then when the Germans or the Croatians would wake up, realize what's going on, they would have the superior firepower and armor. And then we would have to run away, disperse yourself. And you run one way, run another. And we try to meet up again someplace. And that's how we spent our time.

In our unit, I was one of the kids. But there were two other kids. One was 11 years old, and one was 12. And our job was first to carry ammunition to the locations where they couldn't reach or whatever it was. But also, when the Germans started building bunkers-- and to get to the bunker, bigger person couldn't crawl like the kids were.

So they would send us. We would come all near there. And they would send us to crawl under, and maybe with a wire cutter, snip some wires for them. Or we would go with hand grenades. And we would lob them inside the bunker. We're talking kids now. Anyway, that continued for a while.

I thought I'd crossed the country from one end to the other, just marching-- not marching, walking. Lots of times, we were hungry and cold. But we were always-- at least I was always sleepy. I just wanted to just lie down on the ground and sleep. We didn't have that much-- that luxury. Anyway, that's how it went until we got to another point. And there was some boats were going to the islands. And we hopped on the boats. And went to the island. And they were the island--

These are islands off the coast?

Yeah. There was 20,000 islands along the Yugoslavian coast. But this was one of the major islands. There was about maybe 10 big ones that has couple of cities in these island. So we went there. And the partisans were established there. And finally, we got jobs in that place where we could work from 8:00 to 5:00, sort of. I was working in a machine shop, where we repaired weapons. And we made medical equipment, like sterilizers. And we also made hand grenades. But that was-- yeah, under adult supervision.

What did-- tell us what your father did. And I particularly want you to tell us about when he was accused of spying.

My father was in the same unit that I was. But they made him-- they called it a [NON-ENGLISH], which meant supply sergeant. And he was working as a supply sergeant, meaning he had to go to the warehouse, get enough flour for all the men that were there-- it was about 50 or so-- truck drivers, machinists, all these different. Oh, yeah, they fixed searchlights which was taken to the front and all that and for the hospital equipment.

So he was responsible to get all the food and anything else to distribute to the men. Here, we didn't have any ladies, just men. So the guys get a little piece of bread. That's your daily ration. And they're big, strong guys that can live on that.

So they would say to my father, you got to get us more food. My father said, they won't give us. They give so much per person. He would get flour. And then they would bake it there. And they would put the roll of bread on the scale. Hey, there is only 15 decagrams over here. It's supposed to be 20. Yeah, but, my father would say, if you had measured it yesterday when you received it, was 20. But now, it's dried up. So it's-- they said, no, you cheated us, taking flour, and selling it, and all that. Anyway, so that was really tough for him.

And then one time-- my father was very religious. One time, as he was saying his prayers-- he would go outside in the field and say his prayers-- somebody saw him like this, facing the wall, and saying the prayers. And his mouth was moving. And they said, aha, he must be communicating with the Germans. So they reported it.

So next thing you know, he's taken to the command. They set up a court, a kangaroo court if I ever saw one. OK, Comrade Danon-- by the way, comrade was the term. This was under the Communist rule. And they used the word comrade. If they used mister, that means that you are not one of us. Comrade Danon, admit it, will it be easier for you. We'll make it easier for you.

He says, I didn't do anything. What did-- you were talking to the Germans. No, why would I be communicating through Germans? Who in their right mind would think that a Jewish person would be betraying the soldiers here, the partisans? Besides, if the Germans would come here, I would be the first person they would shoot. So Comrade Danon, we know it all. We know everything, don't hide. So after three-four hours of this, they let him go.

OK. Well, I didn't see my father for three-four days. And they were wait-- and they were asking me, where is your father? Who is going to go to the warehouse, get the bread for us? Where? I said, don't ask me. I'm not in his unit. He is the supply sergeant. I'm over here working on the ammunition. And I didn't see him for two weeks.

Then I get a telegram. It tells me to report to another island. I show it to my commanding officer. He says, OK. It didn't say your father on the telegram. It says another name. It was an official telegram. They didn't have communication. They sent it by courier. Somebody carries it. So I show him. It looks official. OK, you have to go.

So I went to the other island. There was no my father, no nothing. And then by that time, the Allies, they started recognizing the partisans as a fighting unit. And they started coming in from Italy, where they had invaded across the Adriatic. They were sending supplies to the partisans-- clothes, food, ammunition, medicines, and all that. Excuse me. So there would be a PT boat would come, unload the thing, and go back empty. And then I said, hey, where are you guys going? Well, we're going to Italy. Can I hop on? Yeah. OK. So I hopped on. And I went to Italy across the sea.

But still not knowing where your dad is?

No. I didn't know where he was. So in Italy, they had-- a lot of people had done the same thing I had done from Yugoslavia, the people who were running away. So the British had set up a little camp-- not with tents, but there were villas. This is Southern Italy. And this was in the winter. So villas belonging to rich people from the North were empty now. So they put us so many in one villa, so many in another. And they would provide us food.

OK. So I was there for a while. And then the city, one of the Italian city, was not too far from there. So I went to the city. And I'm walking down the street with a couple of guys. Whom do I see? My father. Yeah. Oh, hi. How did you get here? Yeah. OK. So anyway, we got together there. And he joined my group. And we stayed there for a while.

And we met one or two of my aunts who had also come the same way. But now, this was a regular thing. The British boats would go there with food and supplies. And they would bring their-- they called them refugees to Italy. And we were filling up that area. And the people who owned the villas, they wanted to use them now. And there was a pressure. So they wanted to send the people to Egypt, to the desert land there. And they started doing that.

At this time, Isak, let me ask you-- and I'm going to jump us forward in just a minute. But did you have any idea, at that point, where your mother and your sisters were?

No, we didn't.

You did not, OK.

My father would, on occasion, get a little melancholy and ask me, do you think we'll ever see your mother and sisters? I said, look, Dad, what do I know? And what does it mean what I think? We are here. And I hope they're still alive. And when everything is settled, we'll get together, hopefully. But we knew what was going on everywhere. If I can get to another point just for a second--

OK.

--if I can digress, people here were saying, we didn't know what was going on. That is not true. We lived there under the Italian occupation. We could go buy a newspaper and see the big headlines. It says, German troops round up Jews from Warsaw or something, send them to concentration camp. We read that. It's in the daily newspaper. So OK, I'll get back to the--

Isak, we're starting to get towards the end of the program and hoping we might be able to ask our audience just a couple of questions before we wrap up. Tell us how you reunited with your sisters and your mother.

OK. Well, we learned-- this was right before D-Day. I don't mean-- yeah, invasion of France.

June of 1944, right?

Yeah, June 1944. We learned that the United States government, we were told, President Roosevelt, had invited 1,000 refugees to come to the United States for the duration of the war. So we signed up. Well, we got accepted. And I understand that there was many, many more people than 1,000 who wanted to come, like 6,000 or something. I don't know the application. But we were accepted. And in short order, the shipment of 1,000 refugees from Italy would go to the United States. And we're just getting ready. They said, prepare whatever.

And then we learned that my mother and two sisters had come not where we were, but also in Italy, the southern part. So we make arrangements for them to come join us. That was a little problem because we had signed up to go to United States. And within two weeks, we were going. So we told the authorities, if you have a room for three more, fine. If not, take us off. Well, imagine the red tape-- sometimes, it's not working too well. Because they says, OK, put them on. And they were part of our group.

So right before you left, you were reunited.

Just maybe about four-five days before. They came the same way we did-- not from the same place, but same PT boats that were going there, delivering food, coming back with people. That's how my mother and two sisters came. Anyway, that was our story in Italy.

Let's turn to our audience for a couple of questions. There's obviously lots that we haven't covered, much less about what happened to Isak and his family when they came to the United States and stayed at that army camp in New York. But let's see. If you have a couple of questions, if you will make it brief, I will repeat it so everybody in the room hears it, including Isak. And then he'll answer your question. And I'd like to add that when we finish the program in a few minutes, Isak, you'll be able to stay behind and chat with people if they want to ask you more questions?

Yeah, sure.

OK, great. Do we have a question? Yes, right here in the front.

It says in your bio that you were allowed to stay in the US. But did you ever go back to Europe to visit [INAUDIBLE]?

The question was you were allowed to stay in the United States and did you go back and visit?

Let me amend her question, if I can, and also say that the expectation wasn't that you would stay in the United States.

Before we came, we had to sign-- well, agree that we were going to stay here just for the duration of the war and no longer. And we would go right back. So the war was over. And they said, OK guys, get ready. We are going back. And we said, back to what? Here you have immigration quotas. You're trying to screen people whom you're going to let every year. Well, you screened us well enough before we came. And we lived in the United States, albeit in a barbed wire camp. But you know who we are. And we know who you are. Why not take us under the quota?

So OK. It was a political fighting back and forth. We had a friend in House of Representatives. And would you believe, I forgot his name. But anyway, I shouldn't have because he was a good friend. And he worked on it. He introduced legislation. And we were allowed to stay. But first, we had to leave. We had to go to Canada. I mean, we had to leave. Where do you leave? We couldn't go back there. So we went to Canada. And the same day, we got our papers and crossed over the bridge in Niagara Falls. We walked over the bridge, presented the papers, and we came in. And that was-- but that was a big, big political to-do.

And Isak, have you been back? That was the other part of your question. Have you been back? Have you been back to Yugoslavia?

Did I go back to Yugoslavia?

No. I didn't. My other sisters, my two other sisters did. I served in the US Army stationed in Europe, believe it or not. There was a Korean War. I'm an interpreter. So where do they send me? To Paris, to France.

You did not speak French, incidentally, at the time.

So anyway, I was over there. And when you're a soldier, there's American planes flying all over for free. So let's take three days off. OK. Hop on the plane. Where's the plane going? Oh, we're going to Berlin. You want to go? No, I don't want this plane. I'll take the next plane. Yeah.

So I happened to visit all these different cities. I was even in Africa during the time that French and their colonies were fighting and all these Legion of Honor. And I was in Casablanca. I hopped in the plane. Where are you going? Athens, Greece. OK, sounds interesting. Let's go. Next one goes to London. OK, I'll stay here for a few more days. So this is-- but this was my vacation, my leave. I didn't leave my job. I had a job to do in France.

I think that we probably need to close up now. We're at the end of our program. I'm going to turn, in just a moment, back to Isak to offer us a concluding thought. I want to thank all of you for being here with us today, remind you that we'll have First Person programs each week until mid-August. So hope you can come back and join us, and again, remind you that Isak, when we finish the program, will remain behind for anybody who wants to ask him-- there's lots of things to ask him about, I can assure you. It's our tradition at First Person that our first person has the last word. And so on that note, I'd like to turn back to Isak to close today's program.

Well, I didn't speak so much about the Germans and the hate that they had for the Jews. And that's how Hitler and his Nazis got to power. But that's the story. It was-- he came with the picture that-- with the idea to destroy all the Jewish people and take their possessions, and with that money that he would get, he would buy arms and conquer the rest of Europe.

And the German people supported him. But not all the people supported, like nothing is 100%. There were some people who did not support him. But these people, unfortunately, they said, OK, it doesn't involve me. So they stood to the side. They were like, it's not our thing. And by the time they decided that they should have been interested in it, was too late.

And that reminds me of an article that I read one time. I mean, it's a small paragraph. It says, they came to for the Jews and I was there. I saw it, but I didn't say anything. I wasn't Jewish. So I didn't do anything. And then they came for the communists. I saw it. I didn't do anything because I'm not a communist. So they came for the Gypsies. I saw it, didn't say anything because I wasn't one of them. Then they came for the Catholics. And like this, one and another-- and then I didn't say, I didn't protest. I didn't say anything. And then finally, then they came for me. And I look around, and there was nobody left to protect me just like I didn't protect others.

And that's one thing that I would like to say. Too often, at least in my life, in my regular life, and work, and social situation, people-- your own good friends-- make disparaging remarks about some other group or somebody. They are that way-- I mean, they as a group, or they as a religion, or they as a race, they are that way. And you get all riled up. But you don't say anything. And you don't want to lose their friendship.

And I think that's wrong. That's what happened in Germany. And that caused a lot of evil. So I'm suggesting to anybody who will take my suggestion, if you hear anybody talk bad about one group or another, speak up. Don't let it go unanswered. Do the right thing. That's my word.

[APPLAUSE]

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Thank you.