Wednesday, March 20, 2013

1:00-2:01 p.m.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: GEORGE PICK

Held at:
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW
Washington, DC

(Remote CART)

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>> Bill Benson: Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I'm the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us. We are just starting today our 14th year of *First Person*. Our first *First Person* of 2013 is Mr. George Pick, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2013 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 weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust, who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experiences associated with the Holocaust. Each guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue until mid August. The website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

George Pick will share with us his *First Person* account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor, for about 40 minutes. If time allows toward the end of the program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask George a few questions. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from George is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have a brief slide presentation to help with his presentation.

George Pick was born March 28, 1934 in Budapest, Hungary to Istvan and Margit Pick. Hungary is highlighted on this map. Pictured here are Istvan and Margit with their newborn son, George. Here we see George and his two cousins in a miniature horse-drawn carriage in a park in Budapest in 1941. George is seated at the front of the carriage.

George attended school in Budapest. Here's George on a seesaw at his nursery school, and George is circled. This is a Mother's Day card that George made in the first grade. Here is

George with his non-Jewish neighbors in 1943.

After Hungary allied itself with Nazi Germany, Istvan and Margit lost their jobs due to new laws restricting the participation of Jews in the new economy. Istvan was conscripted to labor battalions, and the family was forced to move into buildings marked with the yellow star, like this seen in the photograph. That fall, the family went into hiding. The Pick family was discovered, the children taken and George placed in a home with 500 other children. George and another boy escaped and went back to their hiding playing where George was reunited with his parents. Two weeks later, the entire family was sent to the ghetto. They were liberated by the Soviets in January 1945.

In this 1946 photograph we see George with a group of survivors, all of with whom the Pick family had been in hiding. And the circle is, of course, on George.

Following the war, George lived in Hungary where he earned a degree in engineering until late 1956, when he escaped and made his way to the United States to live with his uncle in New Jersey. After working as a laborer, George got a scholarship for an intensive English language course at Temple University in Philadelphia. He then went to work for Westinghouse as an engineer. George would later teach engineering at the Catholic University of America, here in Washington, DC. After earning his Ph.D. he worked for the US Navy as an aerospace engineer from 1966-1995, retiring from federal service as a technical director at navy headquarters in Crystal City, Virginia.

While George continues to do consulting work, a great deal of his time is spent on two books. He recently completed his autobiography and is currently looking for a publisher. The second book is a scholarly book about the history of 40 Jewish communities in a particular region of Hungary that he is currently writing.

George and his wife, Leticia Flores pick, who retired from the Mexican Foreign Service, live in Arlington, Virginia. George performs several roles as a volunteer here at the museum. He speaks frequently at local high schools and universities, and has spoken at the National Defense University and Department of Defense's Office of Inspector General.

George also works for the Education Department and Visitor Services. You will find George here every other Sunday, where he works in the museum's movie series. George also is a professor at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute of George Mason University, where he teaches courses involving technical subjects, as he explained to us over lunch today, about the future of space travel, for example.

When he has spare time, George also works with ReSET, a terrific name for an organization of retired scientists, engineers and technicians, who volunteer to teach science to elementary school students.

George and Leticia are also now participating in the Arlington Retirement and Learning Program.

With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mr. George Pick.

[Applause]

>> George Pick: Thank you, Bill.

>> Bill Benson: You're live.

>> George Pick: Thank you very much, Bill, for your kind introduction.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, George. Thank you not only for being willing to be a *First Person*, but to be our very first for 2013. So thank you, and thank you to our audience for being our first of the year.

Glad to have you here.

We've got a lot to cover. We'll start. You were nearly 4 1/2, George, when Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. Let's start first with you telling us what your life was like, what your community was like in those years leading up to the beginning of World War II with the invasion of Poland in September 1939.

>> George Pick: I like to first start with my family. My family had been in Hungary, and I had documents for this, for 230 years prior to the early 20th century. Most of my family members were either professional, such as jewelists, lawyers, engineers, doctors, and not a few of them were businessmen as well.

My grandparents' families were very large. All of my grandparents had 8 or 9 siblings, of course. That made the family larger even in the second, third generation. They lived in all parts of Budapest, but my immediate family moved to Budapest in the latter third of the century. That's where I was born.

As you mentioned in the introduction, my father was an engineer. He worked until 1935, 1936, when we had, as most of part of the world, the Great Depression, and he lost his job. He was doing occasional work until 1938, when my grandfather got him an engineering job. My grandfather was the chief engineer in a very large factory, and he worked that. And that ended on January 1, 1939.

>> Bill Benson: Before we go there, George, your mother also worked. Tell us a little bit about why she worked.

>> George Pick: Well, after the first world war ended, the Austro-Hungarian empire fell apart, and particularly Hungary lost 2/3 of its area and 1/2 of its population. There was always an underlying anti-semitism in Hungary. Because of that, and because of the resentment of losing the war, Hungary was the first country in Europe to enact an anti-Jewish law, which was called the Numerus Clausus. This was enacted in 1920-21.

>> Bill Benson: Well before Hitler's rise to power.

>> George Pick: Well before Mussolini and Hitler, correct. Because of that, the Numerus Clausus was mostly because of the overrepresentation of Jewish students in universities, the Jews were roughly 5% of the population, and 50% of the university students were Jewish. So what they did is they said too many Jews and they kicked them out. One of them was my uncle, Charles, Hungarian. He was beaten up. Not just kicked out, but physically assaulted, kicked out, among many thousands of students.

So he and a number of his friends essentially left Hungary, and he personally went to Italy to start all over again. He was a third-year student at that point. It took him 8 years to get a medical degree and graduate the university.

My mother finished commercial school, and at age 16, 17 she had to go to work because both of her older and younger brothers had to be given money to continue their studies. Her younger brother was in Berlin, studied to be an optometrist.

>> Bill Benson: Really, she had to work in order to support her brothers continuing their educations elsewhere?

>> George Pick: That is correct. My grandfather, although he was a chief engineer, his money was not that much. We lived in a very -- or they lived, actually, in a very small apartment and had enough to eat and everything else, but not enough to support the two children.

>> Bill Benson: In light of the anti-Semitic laws passed in Hungary, you told me your family was very assimilated. Say a little bit more about that.

>> George Pick: My family was assimilated, to the best of my knowledge, ever since the 19th century. They lived in smaller towns, and as I mentioned they had chosen professions such as medical, engineering and so forth, and there were a number of mixed marriages.

They did not say that they were not Jewish, but they didn't emphasize it either. And so it was somewhat of a very bad surprise to them when in 1938 the Hungarian Congress had enacted the first anti-Jewish law. I would say this Numerus Clausus law sort of wasn't enforced after 1928. Between 1928 and 1938, that decade. There were no Jewish laws enforced.

>> Bill Benson: They were still on the books?

>> George Pick: On the books, but not enforced. Then in 1938, they had the next one, the first Jewish law, which essentially had deprived about 20%, 25% of the Jews of their existence. That is when my father, for example, lost his job, and many others.

They thought that this was going to be the one and only law. They were very disappointed, because less than a year later, there was another law, which was essentially, again, even more proscribing, more -- putting more problems on Jewish life, mostly, again, due to economic conditions.

>> Bill Benson: That would have been late 1939?

>> George Pick: It would be late 1939.

>> Bill Benson: So that's really right after World War II has begun, with the invasion of Poland. Even though the full brunt of the war would not come to Hungary until 1944, 4 1/2 years later, you felt its effects almost immediately. I think that's exactly what you're beginning to tell us.

Tell us what life was like for your family in the early years of the war.

>> George Pick: OK. I just want to say that with the second Jewish law there was a secret part to it, which was not publicized, which was that people who were not anti-communist and pro-Nazis were essentially declared people who were not to be trusted. And these were the socialists, communist party was legal at that time, and the Jews. And these people were ordered to serve the country as laborers, slave laborers, forced laborers. So the Jews, and the Jewish man particularly, were in this category.

Now, your question is how did my family live. Well, when my father lost his job, there was a system in Hungary which was relatively typical of Hungarians. What they did is they hired the non-Jewish men, they called them the straw men, or strohmenn in German, those non-Jewish men got the license to run a business, business license. In our case, it was a super, Mr. Dudek, a very nice man, and he took a license out, and my father worked under that license. Nominally, he was his employee, my father was his employee, but in reality, of course, my father bid him. Which many thousands of people did this.

My father had connections, just like everybody else, and as the economy started to spin up for the war, we were not in war as you said, these businesses were fairly prosperous, actually.

I like to add one more thing, which is important. The only person in the family who saw what was coming was my uncle, who came from Padua, who has seen the world in Europe.

>> Bill Benson: The one who studied medicine?

>> George Pick: The one who studied medicine. He saw fascism in Italy, of course, and he saw what was going to happen. He was the only one who left Hungary legally, actually. He married an American citizen in 1938. Because he knew things were going to be bad.

We, in Hungary, did not think. We did not know very much about what was going on in Germany, except for the fact that we heard Hitler yelling and screaming into the microphone. Fortunately, I didn't understand it, but my father and mother did.

>> Bill Benson: You remember hearing it, right?

>> George Pick: I remember hearing it and being frightened by just the sound of his voice. And I asked them what he was saying, and they said "Well, you cannot take a politician too seriously. But it will never happen to us, because Hungary is Hungary here. They are Hungarians and the government will never allow it."

It turns out that the government of Hungary was -- by default, I would say, became an ally of Hitler. I say "by default" because Hungary and Hungarian politicians were trying to get back pieces of Hungary in the inter-war period.

>> Bill Benson: What they'd lost in the first war?

>> George Pick: Correct, what they'd lost in the first war, but nobody was listening to them. The only man listening, actually two, Mussolini and Hitler. So by default, the region was essentially had to ally himself with Hitler with the hopes of getting pieces back.

In 1939, 1940, 1941, Hungary got back the southern Hungarian part, which was Yugoslavia prior, northern part, which was Slovakia, and also Transylvania, northern Transylvania. This was

important for my family, also, because my family members were also domiciled in these areas.

So all of a sudden, my family was in one country again, for 20 years or so we were in three different countries. My father was called up for one of these work camps --

>> Bill Benson: But it was slave labor?

>> George Pick: Slave labor. They didn't get any money, and they had to work very hard.

>> Bill Benson: Slave labor, yes.

>> George Pick: Slave labor, yes. The first time he went to what is now Ukraine, which was carved out of Russia, carved out of Russia, and he was working on a road building project.

I imagine people who are in their late 30s, early 40s, out of shape and they get a piece of heavy metal, piece to break up big stones into small stones. It was not very pleasant.

The fortunate thing was that the unit commander and the people who were in charge of this brigade were rather decent people --

>> Bill Benson: Of his particular brigade.

>> George Pick: Of his particular brigade. Rather decent people. So they did not work people to death, essentially. This went on for three months, and then my father came home.

But then, in 1941 -- this was 1940. 1941, about six months later, June of 1941, when the Germans started to invade Soviet Union, Hungary also became a region, and with that Hungary sped up its industry and put together an army for Hitler, at his urging, 150,000 people, very poorly clothed and poorly equipped, actually. Plus 50,000 Jewish slave laborers.

In about April or May of 1942, these people were sent to the Ukraine. Among them were several of my relatives, several of my uncles and cousins and people who were younger than 40

years old. My father was 41, so he was lucky he was older. Like I said, I had several of them.

Of this group of people, they had a very, very tough time, I would say. That's an understatement. Essentially, 90% of them died. In the winter of 1942-43. Many of these people who went there were not equipped for it. Minus-40-degree weather, number one, so many of them froze to death, many of them were starved to death, and many of them were beaten to death.

Many of the people, non-Jewish leaders, were given orders that until the last Jew is alive they could not come back. So they had a very good reason to essentially get rid of all of the Jews they could.

As a result, plus that the Russian army had a huge overwhelming victory in January of 1943, where the Hungarian army was at the Danube, large river in Ukraine. They broke through that front in five days. Five days they wiped out the Hungarian army. Many of them died. Some became POWs. And also the rest of the work of the slave laborers. And of the 50,000, only about 5,000, 6,000 came home. I was lucky, I had a couple of uncles who survived, several who did not.

>> Bill Benson: That was 1942?

>> George Pick: 1942-43.

>> Bill Benson: In that same time, in 1942, isn't that when Hitler began to press Hungary to start deporting Jews?

>> George Pick: That is correct, yes. If anybody is familiar with the history of the Holocaust, Hitler's final solution was in full-blown and full movement by 1942. The death camps were running. 1 1/2 million Ukrainian and Russian Jews were dead already. Ukrainian, Polish, etc. Hungary had 825,000-member Jewish community, which at that point was the largest Jewish community in Europe.

So Hitler tried to press, or pressure, Horthy to start the deportation. Horthy said, No, we're not going to do it. Hitler was not in the position at that point to do any more than be upset, so we were saved at that point.

That lasted another year and some, and by March 19, it was 78 years ago -- no, 79 years ago yesterday.

>> Bill Benson: Yesterday.

>> George Pick: The Germans no longer trusted the Hungarians, they knew the Hungarians had various connections, back-door connections with both the English and Soviets, and they were trying to get out of the war somehow, and the German intelligence penetrated the Hungarian intelligence, so they knew Hitler was worried about a couple of million German soldiers who were east of Hungary. So what they did, they just came in.

>> Bill Benson: Before we go there, George, come back a little bit, still back to 1943. You told me that was when you, as a child, you experienced your first real sense of the danger and threat. You hadn't felt it as much up until that point. What happened in 1943, I think you were on an outing with your mother, I believe.

>> George Pick: Right. I was relatively insulated until then. I went to a Jewish elementary school, and we did not have -- we had anti-Semitic neighbors, but they were not so anti-Semitic as if they would spit in our face or something. But in 1943, interestingly enough, my father was again called in, and then after he came back, after three months of slave labor, we went to a place, which was a rather nice hotel in the mountains of Hungarian, for a vacation.

My mother and I were walking, and this mountain was full of forests, walking through the

forests, and that was the first contact with the extreme Nazis. They called them the Arrow Cross Nazis.

The Arrow Cross at that point were illegal, but they had gotten together in bigger groups, big groups, in various places, such as that forest in the Matra Mountains. They were, of course, screaming and yelling anti-Jewish slogans. We got right in the middle of that.

So we were rather frightened. These guys didn't look very hospitable, to say the least. But that was my first direct contact with these Nazis.

>> Bill Benson: George, during that time and the time leading up to the spring of 1944, when the Germans came in, how did your family manage to make ends meet? Your father had been called up several times, not working. How did the family make it? How did you eat?

>> George Pick: Well, I mentioned to you about the strohmann system, and my father had a very good business going, and so -- and my mother was also working as a secretary, legal secretary for an uncle of hers, who was Jewish but he was a hero in the first world war, so he had an exemption and he was able to be a lawyer.

So my mother worked there when my father was away, and when my father was back he worked.

So we scraped by. It was hard. Of course, we had to give up a lot of things, which we had before. But I would say that compared to what had happened in Poland, Austria and so forth, we couldn't complain.

One thing I wanted to tell you, before I forget, is that we had relatives living in Slovakia and Austria, and these relatives showed up as refugees in 1942, 1941-42. They somehow slipped through the border. Roughly 25,000 people from Poland, Slovakia, and Austria were able to come to

be refugees in Hungary.

They were telling us the real situation there. A family, for example, escaped from a ghetto just before deportation, from Bratislava. A grand-uncle was in Dachau. At that time, in 1940, if you had enough money, you could buy your way ow. He bought his way out and came to Hungary.

They were telling us about these horrible things. We halfway believed them, halfway didn't. We had a -- we were absolutely sure of one thing: It will never happen us to. But we knew -- I would say we were informed, we didn't know, but we were informed, that indeed things were horrible all around us.

>> Bill Benson: Did they think they had found a safe refuge in Hungary?

>> George Pick: Yes. They thought they found safe refuge. Our family actually had hidden them for two years. The way this operated, they went to one -- every night they spent in somebody else's house, and they had false papers, and they somehow were able to -- the families, somehow, were able to hide them for two years, until the Germans came.

>> Bill Benson: As you began to tell us, Hitler and his other major leaders fought -- knew Hungary was trying to work its own deal out with the allies.

>> George Pick: Exactly.

>> Bill Benson: Because they had so many troops, that had been trapped when that happened, they entered in March of 1944. That changed everything.

>> George Pick: Yes. That certainly did. They came in on the 19th, and --

>> Bill Benson: Of March, as you say 79 years ago yesterday.

>> George Pick: March. 79 years ago yesterday. They had brought with them Eichmann and a small group of SS in their commando. This small group, maybe 120, went immediately to work.

Now, these were the extremely experienced people of how to deport and kill Jews. It was a small number. We're talking about 120 vs. 845,000. But they found ready allies there.

First of all, the government became a pro-Nazi government from one day to the next. They were given orders, almost on a daily basis.

I remember I was 10 years old, my 10th birthday was the day when I had to put a yellow star on myself. My mother and father, we were given orders to provide all transportation, automobiles to bicycles, from automobiles to bicycles --

>> Bill Benson: That was -- they came in on the 19th, your birthday is the 28th. That was essentially nine days later?

>> George Pick: Right. In nine days, they gave probably 100 different orders. Things were mostly transportation and communication. That is telephones have to be disconnected and given. Radios had to be given to the Nazis. And, of course, valuables.

So all of a sudden, virtually one week, we were completely cut off from the rest of the family. I had roughly 160 relatives, and except for those in Budapest we didn't know what happened to them, we didn't know what was going on in the countryside.

What was going on in the countryside was that by the middle of April, three weeks after they came in, they were already collected and concentrated the Jews to ghettos. In the middle of May, that is a month later, they started to deport them. In six weeks, from the middle of May to July 6 or July 7, to be exact, 437,000 people were deported, over 120 of my family members included. 95%

went to Auschwitz and 90% of who went to Auschwitz were gassed on arrival, essentially.

So by July, by the beginning of July, Hungary had only one Jewish community left, and that was in Budapest. They were ready to start the Budapest Jews. That was the largest community, so they had some logistics. And the gendarmes, 33,000 people who held these Jews to be deported from the countryside, 3,000 of them came to Budapest to start this process.

>> Bill Benson: To sort of summarize, Eichmann and the Nazis went out into the countryside and cleared out the countryside of every Jew they could find, leaving those that were still in Budapest. As you said, in six weeks, 445,000 people, and I think you told me that worked out to about 12,000 to 14,000 per day, during that six-week period, a total of 147 transport trains.

>> George Pick: Correct, yes. We know this precisely, because there were people who were writing down the train numbers and car numbers, etc. So we know precisely how many people were.

Just to give you a horrific statistic, when 13,000, 14,000 people showed up a day in Auschwitz, and 10,000 were gassed, and their bodies were burned, the heat of the burning bodies blew up one of the crematoria. They were not designed to take that many dead bodies.

>> Bill Benson: At the end of that six-week period, about that time is when the heavy saturation bombing by the allies took place over Budapest.

>> George Pick: Yes. June 6 was D-Day, June 6 of 1944. By July, the allies were able to reach Budapest, their long-range bombers. On the 2nd of July, which happened to be a Sunday, I remember it very well, they had the first saturation bombing raids on Budapest. The saturation bombing raid destroyed about 30% of the city.

Now, again, this was one of the lucky points. There were four bombs which fell within about

200, 300 meters from the building in which we lived. The building which we lived, as Bill showed already, was a Jewish building. We had to leave our regular apartment on the 27th of June. So it was just the week before this saturation bombing happened.

All the Jews, 160,000 of them in Budapest, were concentrated in 1900 rather dilapidated buildings. These were the ones they called the starred buildings, or Jewish buildings.

In the Jewish buildings there was always one family who were Christian, mostly the super, and in this particular building the super was a Mr. Varga. His business was -- his duty was, actually, to close the doors and lock the doors 22 hours per day. We had two hours to go out and buy food for ourselves.

Many of the local merchants refused to sell to us, and these two hours were in the late afternoon, when even those merchants who would be willing to sell to us had nothing to sell. So it was a real problem feeding ourselves at that point.

Now, after the 2nd of July and this saturation bombing raid, Horthy received a number of memoranda from various people, according to the history books, and it's true, from Roosevelt, Churchill, that if they do not -- if he doesn't stop the deportations of the Hungarian Budapest Jews, then there would be more and more raids like that.

So finally he got the message, and on the 6th of July he stopped the deportations. There was one more train, 1200 people, which Eichmann was able to smuggle out of the country, so to speak, from a suburb of Budapest. After that, it stopped.

My father, meanwhile, and most other Jewish men from 18 to 60 were again brought into these slave labor camps. This was in the middle of April, so my father had to go to the western part of

Budapest, where he was building defense lines for the Germans.

The Germans figured that they would have to probably have a part where they would go back, but they wanted to slow down, of course. So my father did this from April to October.

>> Bill Benson: Of 1944?

>> George Pick: Of 1944. That summer, except for the bombing raids, it was fairly "quiet."

>> Bill Benson: Although the bombing continued.

>> George Pick: The bombing continued twice a day, yes.

>> Bill Benson: You said the Americans would bomb in the morning, the Russians in the evening. You would sort of plan your forays out around in between the bombing schedule.

>> George Pick: Right, right. It was -- after this bombing, I was terribly afraid. If you can imagine this saturation bombing, it was horrible, three hours. My mother put a big pillow on my head so that to muffle the noise. For many years after that, maybe two decades or so, I could not go to sleep unless I had a pillow on my head. It was rather psychologically impressed, impressed me quite a bit. I am still afraid. If I hear a noise which is unexpected, then I get sort of --

>> Bill Benson: So George, it was, and this is very relative, it was relatively calm for that period during the summer months. But then what happened in October to change all of that again?

>> George Pick: Well, my father came back. His unit was back to Budapest. October 15 was a very big day, because Horthy, too little, too late, decided to do the "honorable thing," and he had a radio broadcast saying that Hungary is going to get out of the war, it will be neutral.

Now, in August of the same year, that is a few months before, the Romanians already did that, and the Romanians switched sides. The Romanian forces now fought with the Soviets, instead of

against, and the forces were already in eastern border of Hungary. So it was rather late to make a meek attempt at getting out. And this meek attempt was doomed to failure. We thought, we were hoping that maybe we would survive.

but in two hours, the government completely collapsed, Horthy was arrested, his family deported actually, and the Arrow Cross, the most extreme Nazi Hungarians took over.

Eichmann, who left in July, came back, and 10 days later the first 10,000 young women, among them several of my aunts, were rounded up and deported. And after that, 50,000, roughly 50,000 Jews from Budapest were deported, between October 15 and December 1.

>> Bill Benson: The important thing, among many, to think about here is this is just months before the war is going to be over. They're losing badly, complete defensive situation, and yet there's Eichmann back with a vengeance, to use that opportunity to get the last of the Jews out of Budapest.

>> George Pick: Yes. Eichmann was obsessive about this, and Himmler and a lot of these -- and Hitler, of course, they were obsessive. They didn't care what happens with the war. They felt they could kill every last Jew, then even if they lose the war they won the war.

It's amazing, if you think about it. Now we have less than 100,000 Jews in Budapest. The rest of them already were deported. And why? Just to give you an illustration, by then the trains were stopped running, or the trains were running to the west but they didn't have room for the Jews. So the Jews were forced to walk, in November, December, or October, November of 1944, from Budapest to the Austrian border. That's 200 kilometers. 50% didn't make it.

The Hungarian Nazis shot everybody who sat down. So 50% didn't make it, and the Nazis were rather disappointed. They wanted to have able-bodied people for work. At that point, they were

stopping already. They wanted workers. They didn't get anything. They got skin and bone people who could hardly walk.

What happened then is my father got a call-up. In fact, his unit commander told him and his unit they were going to be deported. This was at the end of October.

The unit commander was, again, a lucky star, he was a very, very nice guy. He had a Jewish fiancee who happened to live in our building, and 200 slave laborers got 24 hours furlough. He told them that tomorrow morning we're going to get you in a train, and we will take you to Germany to work.

So my father came home --

>> Bill Benson: He said you can have a furlough before we do that?

>> George Pick: Right. You get a one-day furlough, from whatever, morning to the next day.

So my father, obviously, didn't want to get deported, and he had a plan, which didn't work out, with another friend of his. Then he was, by the evening, he was absolutely frightened. He went to another friend of his, a business associate. He said, Guys, I'm going to be deported in less than 10 hours, and I need someplace to go. Can you help me?

This fellow, Gyekis, had a partner who were not Jews, Rangberg. He gave them money to run the business. Gyekis, we didn't know it, but he was working with the Hungarian resistance.

So he told my father, he gave him a piece of paper, said, well, go to this particular address, and it is a textile factory, and find this particular person, his name is Raju, he will take you.

So my father went there, found Raju, who happened to be the same person as Rangberg, and the place was the textile factory for the Hungarian army uniforms. There was a big sign on the door.

For all practical purposes, that's what he saw. There was a big wall.

It turns out this was a hiding place for roughly 70 Jewish slave laborers who, just like my father, were able to get out and able to find this place.

We didn't know what happened to my father, completely. After he left, we didn't know anything, until roughly the middle of November. Then we got the piece of paper from him, brought in by a Hungarian soldier, and the paper was very simple, it says "George and Margit, please immediately pack whatever you need, minimal amounts, and come with this soldier."

But we didn't do that, but we ended up a couple hours later in that same place. The reason why we couldn't do it is we got into raid, a Nazi, couple Nazi teenagers came in and raided our building and stole whatever they could, so we couldn't leave. By the time the raid was over, the curfew hours came in.

So we asked to be let out, we had the yellow star, and we went to this hiding place where my father was. Once we were there, we found out that many of these men did the same as my father did, that is to bring their families in.

They had information that the deportations from these Jewish houses started in earnest, so they felt that people were much safer in this hiding place. That's how we got here.

>> Bill Benson: George, so everybody understands that, this was, for the outside world as far as they were concerned, it was an operating uniform-making factory, and that everybody in there was making uniforms for the Hungarian army.

>> George Pick: Right.

>> Bill Benson: In reality, it was a false front.

>> George Pick: Right.

>> Bill Benson: And a hiding place.

>> George Pick: Right. That's what I thought I said.

>> Bill Benson: Just to make sure we got that.

>> George Pick: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Now it had kids in there.

>> George Pick: Right. It had 170 people, and the kids, roughly 22 kids. We didn't know after that what had happened to the people who stayed behind.

>> Bill Benson: Of course.

>> George Pick: We found out after the war, what happened is the very first next morning that particular building was surrounded by Nazis.

>> Bill Benson: Your building.

>> George Pick: The building where we were a few hours earlier was surrounded by Nazis and they were taken to the brick factory. Usually, the brick factories, which were on the border of the city, they were the ones where the transit camps. From there, they were sending collectively a couple thousand people, then send them to the west.

Now, in this group, from my building, there was my grandmother and two of her sisters. They were there. They were over 70 years old ladies, and Mr. Varga who knew the family for 20 years went to an uncle or a brother of theirs, who was already under the protection of Wallenberg, he lived in a protected building, and told him that his three sisters are to be deported, and my great-uncle

called Wallenberg's office, and somebody went and picked them up and brought them out. But the rest of the building was deported.

>> Bill Benson: Just hours after you left?

>> George Pick: Just hours.

>> Bill Benson: George, our time is very short. Yet, there's so much more for you to tell us. As best you can, once you're in the textile or the uniform-making factory, what happened there until your liberation?

>> George Pick: OK, well, very, very briefly what happened is, if you imagine 170 people, that's a pretty big logistics problem to feed them. There was -- we didn't know it, but there were several groups behind this. They fed us and so forth.

It was a very hard life. Of course, the bombing raids still going on. We couldn't make any noise. Nobody could see that people came in or out. We were essentially very much locked up there.

Then on December 2, there was a raid on us. The Hungarian gestapo found out. It's a long story, but we were betrayed, or the leader of the group was betrayed.

The gestapo people came in, they saw that a man and woman and children out, we thought they were going to massacre us there, but they didn't because we were able to bribe them.

After that, they said we were under their protection. A few days after that, the leaders of this group where we were decided that the children would be taken to a Red Cross orphanage. I was among the older ones. The youngest was 6 months old. 22 of us went there. Or they took us there.

It was a horrible place. 500 kids, 35 to a room. Very few people around, no food, and a friend

of mine and I decided to escape. The next morning, we escaped from that particular building, which was lucky for us because a few days later these children were taken to the Danube and shot at the Danube.

So we went back to our parents, and a few days after that two officers of the -- two officers came, and they told us that now there is a ghetto. A ghetto opened at the end of November in Budapest. A large ghetto opened, and the only ghetto which survived, actually.

So we were taken there, out of the 170, 65 went to the ghetto, the rest escaped. We were one of them. My father became a police there. Mostly, these police, "Jewish police," were there to protect the Jews. But he got the nightstick and the white thing, white band, which said that he's a Jewish police.

>> Bill Benson: You were in an old building, a large old building. How many of you were in there?

>> George Pick: We were roughly 200, of whom about 22 was from our group, and the rest of them were old people from an old-age home, Jewish old-age home.

We weren't in the building very long, because by December 24 a full siege of Budapest had begun. So everybody ran down to the basement, and the people, the old people died, one, two, three, four a day, mostly of starvation. The ghetto had food. That was not a problem. The problem was how do you get the food and bring it back?

Imagine a 24-hour-a-day battle where everywhere there are sharpshooters, you don't want to walk on the street because you would be shot.

My father was patrolling the streets. He lost three of his partners. He was lucky he didn't get

shot. But we found our grandparents, his parents, there. And he did this because of double rations. He brought us some food, but it was not enough.

By the end of December, beginning of January, the Wallenberg people came in. Wallenberg felt that, by then, things were very, very dangerous. The Arrow Cross no longer had any respect for the papers which these people had. They shot them by the hundreds.

10,000 of them came into the ghetto, this was January 4, and by then the ghetto had 70,000 people. From January 4 to January 18, which is essentially two weeks, we had no food. So most of the people who died there just starved.

>> Bill Benson: It was also an especially brutal winter, wasn't it?

>> George Pick: Especially brutal winter. The Danube had completely frozen up. Of course, where we were there was no electricity or water. We did our thing -- the basement was such an old building, had no floor, but it was just dust, dirt. So we had a big hole in the middle. That was the latrine. You can imagine the stink, the lice; no conditions, of course, for being able to wash ourselves.

Then on the 18th -- or the 17th, my father came home, or back into the bunker. When we had some small let-up in the fighting, and the bodies were collected and were taken to a center square, right in front of the building, facing the square.

In the square there were maybe 3,000 frozen bodies. So by the 18th the Russians came in, and then we went home.

There was no celebration. We did not know even how many people were alive or dead, but we knew that we wanted to go back where we came from, or what apartment we came from. Some months before.

>> Bill Benson: George, before we close, I want to thank the audience. Thank you for being here. I'm going to turn back to George in just a moment to close our program.

One final question before I do that, George: Of the very large family that you had, how many survived?

>> George Pick: 130 didn't. Roughly 34 did.

>> Bill Benson: They were all in Budapest?

>> George Pick: Not all of them, but 90%. A few of them came back from deportation and survived. Most of them were in Budapest, yes.

>> Bill Benson: As you can see, there's just so much more that we can cover, and of course George would end up living under communist rule in Hungary until 1956 when he escaped from Hungary. So we could bring you back and have a postwar discussion that would take a long time as well.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our first person gets the last word. I'll sign off, say thank you, and I will turn it back to George to close our program.

>> George Pick: Charlene Schiff was a survivor, who was a very great speaker, who recently died, stated that she had four I's. I would like to finish this discussion not only in her remembrance, but because I feel this brilliantly summarizes my four thoughts.

Her four I's: Intolerance, injustice, ignorance and indifference. I like to leave you with these four I's. Think about it. Think about that all these four, just one of the four would cause millions of deaths and misery, and unfortunately this is not in the past, it is today what's happening.

Thank you very much.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: If any of you want to come and talk to George when he steps off the stage, ask him questions because we didn't have time for the question-and-answer period --

>> George Pick: I'll be happy to stay here.

>> Bill Benson: Take advantage of the opportunity to at least meet him, if not ask him a question.

OK. Thank you, George.
[Ended at 2:01 p.m.]